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ADMIRIN' YOUR SHADOW

By S. OMAR BARKER

A BUTTON'S got a heap to learn before he's swum the crick,
An' there ain't no way to learn it but to grab a-holt an' stick.
You start in as a roustabout or hoodlum fer the cook,
Or maybe wranglin' hosses, but there ain't no lesson book
That you can git to study on the ways of hoss an' cow,
Nor sweet an' gentle teacher that will take an' learn you how.
Fer punchin's one perfession where you got to hoe your row—
Nobody's gonna tell you all the things you got to know.

You'll find advice is mighty sparse. The old'uns always say
That learnin' lasts the longest when it's learnt the hardest way.
They'll give you some ol' pony that's as gentle as a cat,
An' chances is he'll throw you when they spook him with a hat.
They'll rawhide an' hurraw you, for they love to see you sweat,
But jest keep on a-tryin' an' you'll be a puncher yet!
A heap of broncs will throw you an' they'll throw you mighty hard,
An' still you'll have to "savvy cow" before you stand a guard.

You'll rope some steers that's on the prod, I haven't ary doubt,
An' the hands will kinder watch you, but they'll let you fight it out.
You'll ride a scorchin' circle when it's hot as satin sin,
Nor never mind the blizzards when the Boss says "Bring 'em in!"
You'll eat some dust an' like it, an' you'll prob'ly lose some hide,
But they'll never hear you whimper if you've got the guts inside.
You'll take the Boss's powders if you live or if you die,
An' you'll git to be a cowboy, though you often wonder why.

For punchin' cows is work an' sweat, with danger at your boot,
An' maybe forty bucks a month to take you on a toot.
But when the work is over an' the boys all head fer town,
You'll ride along admirin' of your shadow on the groun',
An' your heart will swell to bustin' as you make your pony prance,
When the shadow shows a cowboy that has done put on the pants!

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Adventurers All

Bear Trap

WHEN I was a boy of thirteen I witnessed an act of cruelty that nearly took my life. After thirty years in the bush I still give bears a wide berth. I find it safer.

The fall of 1915 I was a cook's helper at Camp 4 away up in northern Quebec. Behind our camp a small creek followed a sandy hollow. Spring thaws had dug it deep in the loose topsoil. When Number 4 campsite was cleared the chantymen threw trees and brush in there. Except for a spot directly behind our cookhouse the creek was jammed with debris. This cleared pool, which we used for drinking water, teemed with trout. I often caught them on a bent pin. Our garbage pile was near the creek and alive with squirrels and Canada jays. One morning a huge black bear rolled into the clearing, passed us without a glance, nosed the garbage pile—and went to work. Being on an Indian Reserve we had no firearms. Now the bear made a daily appearance until our blacksmith's dog grew too bold. Startled howls brought John Starr—his master—on the run. With his frightened pet in his arms, Starr scratched his chin and pondered. Next day he showed us a devilish contraption; an empty sixty gallon lard barrel bound with heavy iron hoops. Evenly spaced and sloping down from near the top toward the keg bottom, John had driven in a ring of long sharp spikes. We'll use pork for bait," he said. "The bear can get in after the pork allright—but he can't get out."

The cook took one look and spat, "It ain't human to torture a dumb animal like that."

I followed the cook indoors. John Starr was the camp bully and it was useless to argue with him.

Nothing happened that day. Next morning the keg was unmolested.

After breakfast I went outdoors. Like a red ball the sun rose above the pines and the thin air sparkled. By the garbage heap a squirrel set up an angry chatter. I sat there dozing in the warmth until a snort of surprise brought me to my feet.

Behind me the bear swayed upright on his hind legs with the barrel midway down his belly. Startled grunts echoed from the keg; grunts that grew in volume as bruin lost his temper—and worked himself deeper into the trap.

Then hell broke loose!

Driven mad by that ring of cruel spikes that gouged with every movement, bruin rolled along the ground. Then he clambered up and charged my way!

Taken by surprise I tripped and fell backward into the pool. As I shook the water from my eyes I heard him roaring on the bank above. I started climbing up that brushpile that hemmed the waterhole when the sun darkened and the bear crashed down upon me.

Thump! My side went numb. A second glancing blow from the keg and pain

THE MASTER THRILLER NOVELS

* *

FOOLS OF THE LEGION
J. D. Newsom

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Norman Lippincott

SHARK GOTCH OF THE ISLANDS
Albert Richard Wetjen

MURDER AT THE OLD STONE HOUSE
Charlotte Murray Russell

THREE DIED BESIDE THE MARBLE POOL
Carl M. Chapin

THE CHRONICLES OF SHARK GOTCH
Albert Richard Wetjen

MURDER ON PARADISE ISLAND
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DEATH OF AN ELOQUENT MAN
Charlotte Murray Russell

THE FILM STUDIO MURDER
Clive Kenwood

COCKNEY OF THE LEGION
J. D. Newsom

THE JOYOUS TENDERFOOT
George Bruce Marquis

THE TINY DIAMOND
Charlotte Murray Russell

THE MAGPIE RIDES
Tevis Miller

TANGLED TRAILS
George Bruce Marquis

dazed me but I managed to roll clear of those slashing claws. Then the pool was whipped to foam as bruin tried to smash that keg and free himself.

I saw the blacksmith gaping down, powerless to help, as I sprawled there trapped as effectively as the crazed bear in the barrel.

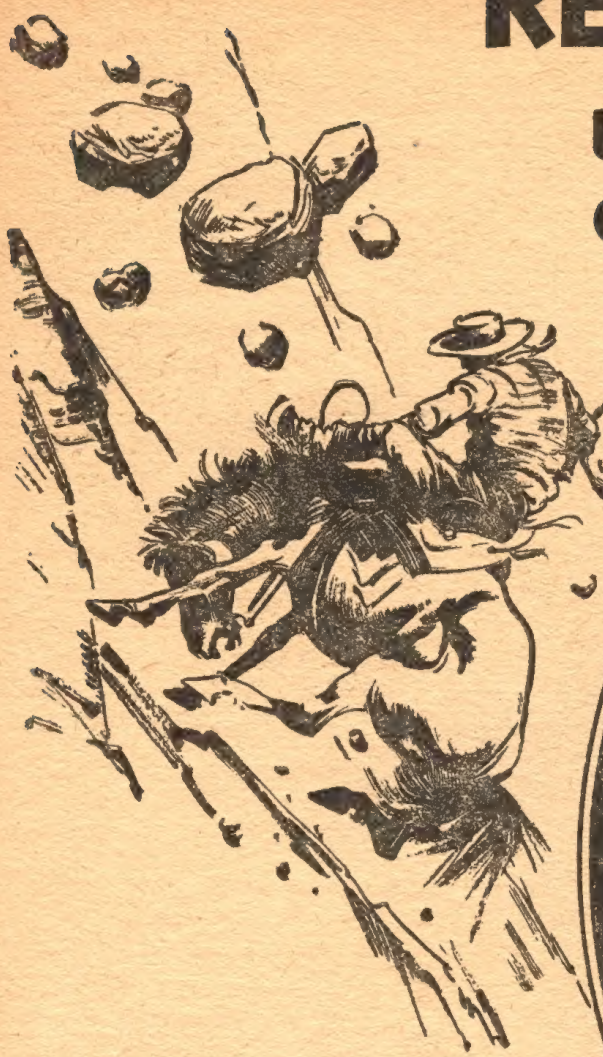
Bruin sensed my nearness for he paused to listen. Then he roared until that tiny space echoed like a cave while I backed away until I reached that pile of logs and brush. I tried to climb but fell. Then somehow it didn't seem to matter. Nothing mattered. The bear and the pool seemed to spin before my eyes. Then consciousness returned. I rolled over and watched him stagger toward me. He started over a partly submerged log, balanced an instant—and slipped! He and the keg almost disappeared beneath the pool.

Water gurgled like an empty bottle filling up. I remember listening to that chug, chug, of the water flowing into bruin's trap. Then the sound stopped. The barrel was full.

J. St. Pierre.

RENEGADE

by John Colohan



He played out a dead man's hand to give a girl her measure of peace in that gunman-infested range—though he knew his only reward would be the gallows!

CHAPTER I
A Dead Man Rises

THE two men travelled at an easy jog along a road that was hardly more than a shallow ledge blasted through stone and crumbling shale. They rode in the shadow of great chunks of rock hanging so loosely that it seemed that the least small jar must send them crashing down. It was long past noon, and the pair had been in saddle since sunup; and in that time they had traded not half a dozen words. Jim Marlow

ROUNDUP

"I'm wanted for murder," he told her. "The man whose name I've taken, is dead!"

and Jim Brendle—they shared the same given name and nothing else. Marlow rode outside, a little in advance. At his shoulder Brendle muttered something in his dry, rasping voice, but the other man didn't answer. Jim Marlow's thoughts were riding far ahead.

There was no warning of the sudden tragedy. Sheer instinct saved Jim Marlow, the old, half-animal faculty for smelling danger that he had gained on lonely trails. One moment he was jogging carelessly; the next he was hunched forward in the saddle, digging spurs into his horse, sending the frightened animal plunging forward in the instant before the rock wall folded in with a crash like thunder. Rocks pelted man and horse, and a boulder smashed against Marlow's head and almost brushed him from saddle before the horse broke through to safety.

A hundred yards it took to stop the stampeding horse. Marlow swung from saddle then and looked back, and he saw dust rising in a little cloud and loose rocks rolling off the road's edge to drop downward into space. The slide had caught Brendle

and his horse and washed them from the ledge. Marlow ran back along the road. Then, fifty feet below, he saw the man and horse lying in tumbled rocks.

Hampered by the handcuffs on his wrists, it took half an hour for him to work his way down the slope to where Brendle was lying face down at the bottom of the wall. Brendle's horse was thirty feet farther on, and plainly dead. But when Marlow turned the deputy over he saw blood bubbling on his lips.

Even as he bent over the lawman, Brendle's eyes opened wide and he stared unseeingly at Marlow. In the bloody, horribly smashed face the lips worked painfully. Words broke through in a mumble.

"That was Ben Dallas, after all," the deputy whispered.

Jim Marlow braced an arm against the lawman's back. "Take it easy, Brendle," he said gently. "It isn't very far to Trail City. I'll get you into town and then you'll be all right."

He knew that Brendle would never be all right again. The deputy's body was twisted grotesquely and one side of his head was smashed to a bloody pulp. The crushed lips moved again.

"Ben Dallas—" Brendle muttered.

Then life went out of him. He sagged back limply. Jim Marlow straightened the twisted body around and fumbled for the pulse, but he knew there was no use. He found no sign of heart beat.

He stood up, looking at the dead man. The handcuffs rubbed his wrists, and he stooped and got the keys from Brendle's pocket. It took some little time to fit the key in the tiny lock, to spring the steel bracelets loose. He worked patiently, a big, lean man in levis, with a body that tapered downward from wide shoulders like a wedge, with a face that was dark and expressionless beneath the tilted hat. It was the face of a man who had left youth somewhere behind him along the trail. He got the bracelets off and let them fall, gleaming in the bright sunshine. He unbuckled the dead deputy's gunbelt and slung it around his waist.

He was free. Free! The word hummed through his brain as he stood there looking at the dead lawman. He was free, and a gun rode on his hip again, and a horse waited in the road above. His hand brushed the black butt of the Colt and he palmed it in swift and expert movement, and then he let it slide back into leather again. He was free!

THREE weeks ago a *Wanted* poster which had been following Jim Marlow for two years had caught up with him in a cow camp on the Sleepy. A sheriff with a memory for descriptions had pushed a gun into his back; and a week later Jim Brendle had arrived to take Jim Marlow back to New Mexico and a hangnoose. On saddle horses, with Marlow in handcuffs, they had started overland for the railroad. Now, he was free. . . .

The big man shook his head at the thought. Not free. He would never be free again. He was once more on his own, but it wasn't freedom. He was a fugitive again; that was all. Presently some rider would happen along this road, and the dead deputy would be found, and the hunt for Jim Marlow would begin once more. It wouldn't end until he was dead or behind the bars.

He gave a final look at the dead man. "Mebbe they'll say I killed him, too," he muttered. His eyes caught on the flash of the lawman's badge. And a sudden, daring thought stirred in his brain. What was life worth to a man forever on the dodge —to a man who lived always for that moment when some bounty-hunting lawman would throw down on him with a gun. But, if they thought that

Jim Marlow was dead, and safely buried . . .

Here was a desperate chance—this thing that had leaped suddenly to life in his brain. "A chance for life," he muttered, and his thin lips curled inward. "A chance to bury—Jim Marlow—"

A little knot of muscle formed under the tight skin along his jaw. And suddenly he stooped and jerked the shining badge from the dead lawman's vest and shoved it in his pocket. He snatched up the handcuffs and snapped them on the dead man's wrists.

"What the hell!" Jim Marlow said.

He had been dealt a funny hand. If he could play it, well and good. If he couldn't it wouldn't make much difference one way or the other. For two long years now he had been sick of running.

"What the hell!" Jim Marlow said; and he gathered the smashed form of the deputy in his arms, and slowly, carefully, he began to clamber up the steep slope with his burden. . . .

THIS was strange range. The road he followed would lead at last to Trail City, but how far the town might be he didn't know. He walked, leading the horse, with Jim Brendle's broken body lashed in the saddle. The deputy had been a big man, and Marlow was a big man, and he would not ask the horse to carry double. So he walked.

He walked. The road swung down from the rocky ledge and became a ribbon of dust winding through sage and alkali. Blisters rubbed on his heels. His throat filled with alkali dust and his mouth was powder dry, and still he saw no sign of life along the road. Then, at long last, far off against the blue of the mountains he saw a house, with smoke rising from a chimney. That way he turned.

It was a big square, two-storied house of logs. There was a long bunkhouse, and barns, and pole corrals, and all the paraphernalia of a big cow outfit. There was also a faint, indefinable air of neglect, of moldering decay, about the place. A saddled horse stood, slack-hipped, in the yard before the house.

The front of the big house looked blank and forbidding but Marlow saw that the kitchen door stood open. It was just turning dusk. Leaving his horse in front the cowboy turned that way, and he was swinging past the kitchen window on his way to the door when, suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks.

Inside that kitchen, lit by a swinging oil lamp, a man and a girl faced each other across a table. For a moment they were motionless, like two people caught up in some strange tableau. But the girl's arm rested on the table, and her hand held a small revolver, and the gun was pointing straight at the man. And it seemed to Jim Marlow, at first glance, that this was the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

And then the girl's voice came to him faintly through the window and broke the spell.

"Get out, Griffon," she said. "Get out of here, and off this ranch, and don't come back again!"

Then Marlow saw the man's face clearly. It was a brute's face, with beetling brows, with a broken nose pushed almost flat, with thick lips curling back in a grin of amusement.

"Put the gun away, kid," the man said. "I don't scare worth a damn."

The girl's husky voice was vibrant with passion. "Get up! Get out of here! Get off this ranch! I'll kill you if you don't!"

"Yuh couldn't kill me with that pop-gun."

"Try me, Griffon," she whispered.

And slowly the man shoved to his feet, and Marlow saw that he was a big man all the way. He was bareheaded, with coarse black hair

rumpled untidily. The man at the window saw the thick column of his neck, the knotted muscles rippling along his back beneath the blue of the faded shirt. He moved awkwardly, like a bear trying to walk.

He shuffled a step closer to the girl. "Put the gun away, kid."

The girl had risen also. "Get back! I'll kill you. Sure as hell I'll kill you!"

She faced him fearlessly, defiantly. Jim Marlow knew that it was time to take out chips. He quit the window, stepped up into the doorway.

CHAPTER II
Renegade's Homecoming

HE had delayed too long. The huge man, back toward Marlow now, closed in on the girl in shuffling steps; and then a huge paw struck out as suddenly as the paw of a striking cat. The gun exploded with a roar that echoed through the house. But the bullet went wide, for Griffon had knocked the gun aside. The lead crashed through a cupboard with a clatter of broken dishes. Then the huge man had the gun.

"Yuh damn little maverick!" he snarled, and hurled the gun contemptuously aside. "Yuh meant that slug for me."

Jim Marlow's clipped voice broke through. "I got another one meant for you."

Griffon whirled with cat-like speed. He stared at the man in the doorway, and his hand dropped to stop just above his gun. It stayed there. Marlow's Colt swung in a little arc.

"Leave the gun stay," Marlow said.

Fury gleamed in the beady eyes. "Who in hell are yuh?"

"I tell you, friend," Marlow said. "Suppose you crawl out of that gun harness. Drop it on the floor. Then we can talk."

"Suppose I tell yuh to go to hell?"

Jim Marlow notched the hammer of the Colt back with a thumb, and suddenly his face was bleak and dangerous. "Cut loose your gun-belt," he snapped, and something in his face or in his voice shook the huge man into action. He fumbled with a buckle and the gun-belt hit the floor.

And Marlow looked at the girl. She stood there, tall and slender and motionless as a statue. "You wanted this gent to go, ma'am?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"That's final," Jim Marlow said. "That's all there is. It means you're on your way, friend."

The huge man hesitated, shrugged, reached for his hat. "Bueno," he said easily. "Plenty of other times—plenty of other girls."

Marlow moved aside from the door, let his gun slip into holster. The huge man regarded that move thoughtfully. Deep mirth stirred in Marlow at the sly expression that flickered momentarily across the huge man's face. He knew then that Griffon wasn't very smart.

"Ain't yuh a stranger here?" Griffon said, and moved a step toward the door.

He wasn't smart at all. Jim Marlow knew it then. He was big and broad and muscled like a grizzly, but he didn't think very fast. He was trying to close with Marlow now, and he couldn't think of anything to say to cover his intent. But he wasn't satisfied to call this business quits; he was trying to get close enough so that he could discount Marlow's gun.

"I'm a stranger," Marlow said.

The huge man was shuffling toward the door, but each step carried him inches closer to Marlow. He wasn't six feet away, and his eyes were gleaming.

"Yuh'll be smarter," he said suddenly, "once yuh get acclimated."

And suddenly he whirled and launched himself in air. His two arms were flung out widely in an effort to fold Marlow in, to keep him from

drawing the gun. He was bigger than Marlow every way—taller, and wider, and heavier by thirty pounds. But he wasn't smart, because he left himself wide-open to attack.

PERHAPS he thought the other man would try to dodge, would try to slip away from that bear-like embrace. But Marlow took two quick steps forward to meet the charge, and his left fist exploded under Griffon's exposed chin and straightened the huge man for an instant, and then Marlow's right fist crashed through with a hundred and eighty pounds behind it, and smashed against Griffon's jaw. And that stunning blow turned the huge man and sent him spinning across the room.

Griffon went to his knees. He rose again and came on, his heavy face mottled with fury, his arms spread wide in a wrestler's stance. But he was stunned and pretty badly hurt, and he had no defense against that hurricane of blows that beat against his face. Jim Marlow stood flat-footed and smashed him, left and right, until the huge man's face was a bloody mess, until his legs went out under him and he crumpled on the floor. Then Marlow grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out into the yard.

But the huge man had stamina, and the blind courage of a grizzly bear. He shook his head and pushed to his knees and lifted himself to his feet. His hand dropped and fumbled for a gun that wasn't there. Then, head down, he started for Marlow again.

But Marlow was a little sick of it. His Colt slid out of holster, swung in a little circle.

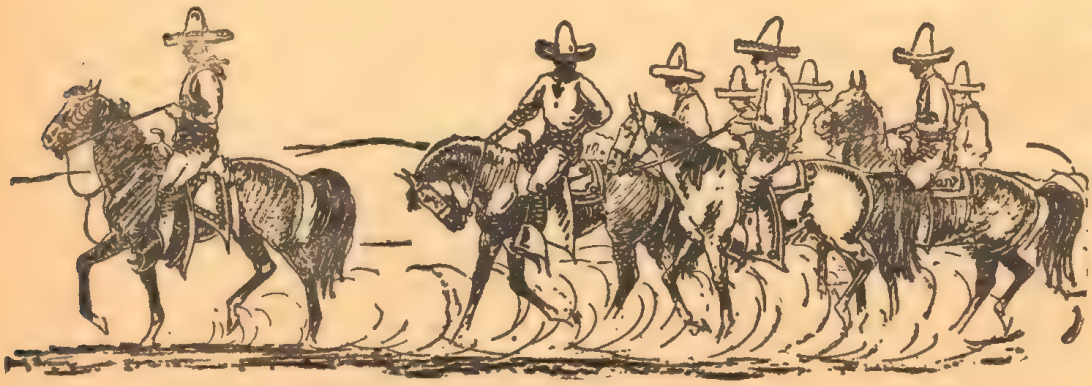
"That's all for now," he said. "Mebbe, some other time, I'll romp with you again. I'm busy now. Crawl on your bronc and head out or I'll put a bullet through you."

Braced on pillared legs the huge man studied the gun. For a moment Jim Marlow thought he was going to walk straight into the Colt. But he shook his head suddenly and turned and went weaving toward his horse. He lingered, hand on horn.

"Yuh fooled me, *amigo,*" he said, and his voice was even and without rancor. "Yuh fooled me, sure as hell. I bet yuh never do it again."

He lifted himself into saddle, glanced once at the other horse with its shapeless burden outlined in the dusk, and then he rode off down the lane. Marlow watched until dust blotted horse and rider beyond the gate. And a husky voice spoke at his shoulder. "I'll never be able to thank you enough," the girl was saying.

He had his first clear look at her then, and he saw that there had been no mistake in his first impression. In a simple gingham dress this girl was lovely—trim and slender and alluring, with dark eyes that met his glance as directly as those of a saddle pard. And



then Jim Marlow remembered that he had no right to think of girls.

He rubbed a bruised knuckle. "Glad I happened by." He nodded toward the horse waiting patiently, and the girl gave a little gasp of horror at sight of the crumpled figure lashed in the saddle.

"Oh, what happened?"

"Accident. A chunk of rock fell in on us. I thought if I could borrow a horse long enough to get to Trail City—"

Her eyes were wide. "Of course. Can't I get you something to eat—you must be hungry—"

"Just a big drink of water," Marlow said. "I'm obliged, but I got to get to town—got to make a report to the coroner."

SHE led the way back into the lighted kitchen and passed him a drink from a covered barrel in a corner of the room. While he was drinking she picked up a chair overturned in the fight, and she was placing it against the wall when, from some dim part of the house, a weak voice lifted querulously.

"Bunny! Bunny! What's happening down there. Thought I heard a shot."

"It's nothing, dad," she called. "It's over now, and everything's all right."

She looked at Marlow. "Dad's sick," she said simply, and then: "But you must be starved, Mr.—Mr.—"

"The name," Jim Marlow said, "is Jim—"

Barely in time did he remember. He had been tangled in a pair of dark eyes, and for a moment he had forgotten that plan he had made back there at the rock-slide. He had forgotten that he had planned to change identities with a dead man, but he remembered it in time.

"The name," he said, "is Brendle—Jim Brendle."

And then the girl was coming toward him, and the dark eyes were shining. "But that's wonderful," she cried. "In your letter you said that you were coming, but I didn't think—I didn't dream—" She had caught his arm and she was looking up at him. "I'm so awfully, awfully glad. Because the doctor says that he—he hasn't very long to live. I think the thought that you were coming is all that kept him alive so long."

She was looking up into Jim Marlow's bewildered face. "You don't know where you are, do you?" she said.

Dumbly the man shook his head. His brain was turning dizzy pinwheels, but that didn't help at all. Apparently this girl knew the man dead outside in the saddle—and yet, that couldn't be, because she thought that he was Brendle.

"You're home," she said. "This is your dad's ranch." And then, graceful as a deer in flight, she whirled and darted toward a hallway. Her husky voice soared. "Dad! Oh, dad! It's Jim—Jim's home at last!"

She came back. She had a trick of quick movement. Her voice dropped. "He's sick. He's awfully sick. Don't excite him."

And then she was leading Marlow down a darkened hallway toward where a yellow oblong of light showed through an open door.

"Get ready for a surprise, daddy," she called. "It's Jim—it's Jim at last!"

CHAPTER III
Son by Proxy

JIM MARLOW'S brain was numb. For the first time in memory it wouldn't work at all. The girl's hand was on his arm, and she was pulling him down the darkened hallway, and he couldn't think of anything to say or do.

But, tardily, he was remembering that he had wondered why Jim Brendle had chosen to follow this roundabout course on his way to New

Mexico with a prisoner. They had made a three-day detour, and he had been puzzled about it at the time. Now he understood. This was Brendle's home, and the lawman had planned to swing by for a visit. That explained it.

And now Jim Brendle's broken body, lashed to a saddle, was outside in the yard! . . .

They were in a bedroom. By the light of the flickering oil lamp Marlow saw an old man lying propped up on a pillow. An old and wasted man with sweeping white moustache, with sunken cheeks, with eyes buried deeply in their bony sockets. The girl pulled him toward the bed.

"It's Jim," she cried. "Daddy—it's Jim!"

The old man put out a trembling hand. "Set, boy," he said. He peered up at Jim Marlow. "I knowed yuh'd come. I told Bunny yuh'd be coming. Set down, boy." He smiled gamely, apologetically. "I'm just a dang old bag o' bones now, Jim. Damn near blind, beside."

Jim Marlow dropped in a chair, and his spinning brain caught at a phrase. *Damn near blind!* That was why, for all that he was staring up at him hungrily, the old man in the bed had not yet realized that Marlow was not his son. But the girl—it was funny about the girl, because she didn't seem to know it either. . . .

"Been a long time since I see yuh, boy. Fourteen years since I trailed my little beef herd outa Texas." The withered hand had dropped on Marlow's knee. "Well, this is where I landed, boy. Lots o' times I've wished that yuh could see it. This is the ranch—and this"—his faded eyes sought the girl standing quietly behind Jim Marlow—"this is the little girl I mentioned—the girl I adopted ten years back. This is Bunny. She's dang near a lady now."

And still big Jim Marlow could think of no words to say. It didn't seem to matter. That frail old man in the bed was patting his knee and smiling contentedly. The girl was saying something but her words blurred in Marlow's brain. He was remembering words spoken before—was remembering Bunny's whisper in the kitchen—

"He's sick—he's awfully sick—"

This wasted, grey little man was dying. But he thought that he was talking to his boy again, and for the moment he was happy. He didn't know that his boy was dead, his body crushed and broken. . . .

What was the proper caper in a case like this? What should a man do—a hunted man trying his damnedest to beat the game?

"Jim had an accident on the road today," Bunny was saying. "He was caught in a slide and the man riding with him was killed."

The old man lifted his head weakly. "Where was that, son?"

Jim Marlow found his voice. "Five or six miles back. The road curves around some cliffs—"

"I know—I know," the old man interrupted. "If I've told the county commissioners about that once I've told 'em a hundred times. Bound to be an accident there some day." But he wasn't very much interested in accidents. His boy was home at last. "I been telling these jaspers I had a boy was a lawdog down in New Mexico. Told 'em yuh'd ride this way to straighten things out some day. Damn 'em to hell—if I could set a saddle—"

"Now, daddy." The girl spoke softly, soothingly.

"I know. I know, honey. But when I think o' Duke Wetzel"—he shook his head, and the faded eyes gleamed for an instant—"No matter. We'll sic Jim on 'em now. Jim'll teach 'em to suck eggs, honey."

"Everything will be fine now," she soothed him. "We'll just turn things over to Jim."

"Which yuh gotta forget this lawdog business now, boy. Right here's

the best little cow outfit ever yuh see. Yours and Bunny's—share and share alike. That's the way I figure. Only I'm done with riding, and somebody's got to take care o' Duke Wetzel. I reckon yuh can handle him, Jim."

Marlow's voice was low. "I reckon."

"Hell's Bells! Sure yuh can! He's a four-flusher, for all his gunmen crew. If I could ride I'd run him into the river. And what I hear, yuh built yourself a rep in New Mexico—"

It was passing strange. Lamplight fell across the bed, and that old man lay there smiling happily, for all that he was close to death. But his boy was home, and everything was going to turn out right. . . .

"When yuh elected to stay with your maw I never said a word, son. Fourteen years ago, that was. Then I heard that she—she'd died, and then the next thing was that you was a deputy in New Mexico. All the time I figgered yuh'd ride this way some day—"

Fourteen years ago. Jim Marlow was piecing bits together, trying to figure what had happened, trying to get something that he could understand. Fourteen years ago this man and his wife parted ways, and the boy had gone with the mother. That seemed to be the how of it. Jim Brendle had been a boy then, and now this old man had forgotten. Old and sick and half blind, he thought Jim Marlow was the boy he'd left in Texas. He didn't know that his boy was dead outside the house. . . .

And Marlow stirred uneasily. "I tell you—dad. I gotta get this dead gent into town. I got to make a report out for the coroner. But I'll be back."

"And you've got to rest, daddy," the girl said briskly. "This is enough of visiting for now. Jim's tired and hungry, and he's still got a ride ahead of him. You know what the doctor said."

"Damn the doctor!" the old man growled. "Don't yuh worry about me, girl. Take Jim down and feed him."

THEY left him there, and Marlow followed the girl back down the hallway and into the lighted kitchen. Her face was grave. "The doctor said he—he might go any time," she said simply. "But, now that you're here—"

She bustled about the kitchen, setting out dishes, slicing bacon, breaking eggs into a bowl. Marlow watched her. "Don't go to any trouble," he said awkwardly.

She smiled at him. "The cook's in town today—she'll be back some time tonight. But this isn't any trouble, Jim. I'm so glad you're here I feel like singing."

He watched her gloomily. The play was getting out of hand. He had started to run a blazer on the law and the thing had exploded in his face. That old man in the bedroom thought he was Jim Brendle; this girl thought the same thing. And Marlow stood there scowling, trying to think of some way to tell her it wasn't so.

Bunny was talking brightly, but he couldn't miss the undercurrent of sadness in her voice. "Things are pretty bad, Jim—worse than you think. I've been nearly crazy trying to hold on until you came. We've got one man left, and his wife. She's the cook. All the rest are gone."

"This Wetzel jasper," Jim Marlow said finally, because he had to talk of something. "What about him?"

"He's a ghoul," she said. "He's a cheat and a crook and a killer. Years back—four or five years ago, when Wetzel first came here—daddy caught his outfit in some crooked work of some sort. He trapped them, sent half a dozen of them to the penitentiary. Wetzel's son was in the lot, and he was killed later trying to escape. Wetzel never forgot. That man tonight—Griffon—he's one of Wetzel's crowd. Duke Wetzel's like a vulture sitting on a fence waiting his chance And now, that note—"

"What note?"

"I told you in the letter," she said.

She looked at him curiously. "Dad borrowed money two years back—ten thousand dollars. He borrowed it from Ed Standhope, but Standhope died, and somehow Wetzel bought the note. It's due now in less than a month."

"No money?"

"There's cattle. If we can find them—"

Marlow frowned. "If you can find them?" he repeated.

She was putting his meal on the table. "Wetzel's got a gun-fighting crew behind him. They've driven our men off. No one could blame them for quitting—they never knew when they'd be shot out of a saddle from behind. A month ago we had three men. Now we're down to one. And then they drove our cattle off."

The cowboy's head lifted. "Rustled them?"

"No," Bunny said. "You couldn't rustle a whole herd like that—not even in this country. They just cut our fences and scattered the cattle—stampeded them over a hundred miles of country." She filled his cup with steaming coffee. "You go ahead and eat, Jim, and I'll tell you all I can."

And as he ate the girl told him, quite simply, the story of her fight against desperate odds. The Box D beef had been gathered, and they were waiting to make the drive across the hills to the railroad shipping pens. On a night filled with rain and storm a dozen riders had hit the herd. One of the Box D men had been killed, another wounded, and the rest had been driven off. The cattle had been scattered over miles of country.

"It's wild country," Bunny said. "It's all hills and pockets and canyons. It'll take a roundup crew to gather them again. And I haven't been able to hire a crew, and the note's due in less than a month, and there's no other way to met it. Pewee—that's the man who stayed—rode out one day to look things over, and someone shot at him. And men are afraid to ride for us because they're afraid of Duke Wetzel's crowd—afraid they'll be killed. "

"Where's the sheriff?"

"He's a fat man. He means all right, I guess. There isn't much law in this country, Jim. So the beef is scattered clear to the desert, and I didn't know what to do. If daddy knew—"

"He doesn't know about it?"

"He thinks we're getting ready for the drive to the shipping pens. I've been afraid to tell him—to let him know—afraid it would kill him. So it's been up to me and I didn't know what to do. That's why I sent that letter to you"

Jim Marlow scowled into his plate. Here was a pleasant little situation. He was an outlaw, a man riding before a noose. But Bunny thought he was Jim Brendle, and that his arrival had solved a problem for her. And she was neck-deep in trouble; no doubt of that.

Should he tell her, then, that he was an impostor—that Jim Brendle was dead outside? Would that make her burden lighter? . . .

HE needed a little time to think things out. "I'll see what I can do," he said gloomily. "Right now I got to get this dead gent into town. If you'll show me where I can rustle a horse I guess I better be rambling."

Half a dozen horses were in the pasture. Bunny showed him saddle and bridle, and he caught a horse and cinched the saddle in place. The girl watched him. "It's twelve miles to town," she said. "You won't be back tonight."

Marlow shook his head. It was turning dark. "I reckon not. There'll be some red tape, and mebbe an inquest in the morning. I'll do the best I can."

No lie, that. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew he wouldn't hurt this girl if he could help it. She went inside for an instant and returned with the news that the

old man was asleep. "No need to wake him, Jim. I'll tell him you had to go on to town. Pewee and Mrs. Barlin will be back tonight sometime, and maybe I'll ride in to town in the morning. Then we could come back together."

Marlow nodded. He swung into the saddle, rode away leading the horse with the shapeless figure lashed to its back. A mile down the road he stopped briefly, remembering that dead Jim Brendle had carried a money belt. He felt somewhat like a ghoul himself when he stripped the belt from the dead deputy's body; but Jim Brendle wouldn't need it any more, and Marlow figgered he knew the place that Brendle would have wanted it to go.

He struck matches, counting the money. He was a little bit surprised. That money belt was crammed with crisp new bills. As nearly as he could figure by match light, there was something like three thousand dollars in the roll.

CHAPTER IV
Wanted!—Gunmen!

IT was dark when he hit Trail City. Lights glowed all along the dusty thoroughfare. He pulled up under a street light to ask directions of a lone man standing on a corner, and then he kept on until he reached the square stone building which the man had said would be the county jail.

There was a light in the office. A moon-faced individual of tremendous girth sat behind a battered desk, and another man, bald of head, and with a thin, cruel face, sat sprawled in a chair in a corner of the office. Marlow stopped in the doorway, glanced at the fat man behind the desk.

"You're the sheriff?"

The fat man nodded, not moving. "Yessir. Bill Highfoot, and at your service. What troubles yuh?"

"I'm Jim Brendle," the rider said. "I got a dead gent outside on a horse. He was killed in a rock-slide on the road between Goshen and here. I brought him in."

The fat sheriff labored to his feet. His eyes narrowed calculatingly. "Yuh're Jeff Brendle's kid, eh?" he said, and shoved forth a meaty hand. "Now, what's this about a dead man?"

"His name was Marlow. I was taking him back to New Mexico with me. A chunk of rock fell on us and he got killed."

For a moment, then, Marlow's eyes shifted to the sharp-faced man seated across the office. There was something oddly familiar about that pointed, thin-beaked countenance—something that Marlow could not quite figure at the moment. The man shoved to his feet, stood there with a curious, mocking smile twitching his thin lips.

Then, suddenly, Marlow placed him, the same man they had passed in the street in Goshen yesterday. This man had been walking down the wooden sidewalks of that other town, and they had passed him; and Marlow remembered how Jim Brendle had turned around after the man had passed.

The fat sheriff said: "This is Duke Wetzel."

Marlow remembered that Bunny had likened Wetzel to a vulture, and he saw now how apt the girl had been with her description. With his bald head, his hooked nose, his glassy eyes, Duke Wetzel looked a lot like a vulture. Wetzel put out a hand. "The hell it is," Jim Marlow said, and didn't see the hand.

In the sharp face the beady eyes gleamed. "Salty, eh?" said Duke Wetzel, and, turning his back, walked out of the office.

The fat sheriff's face was troubled. "This dead man, now," he said. "I reckon that's business for the coroner."

They found the coroner playing cribbage in a harness shop half a

block below the jail. His name was Link Lennox, and he was a little man with an air of professional gravity. He was, it developed, also the undertaker. He came back with them to examine the broken body of Jim Brendle perfunctorily.

"Sure squashed him," he said. "Help me get him into my place. We'll hold an inquest in the morning." They carried the dead lawman into the building and laid him on a slab. "What yuh aim to do with the body?" Lennox asked.

Marlow shook his head. "I don't know yet. I'll have to get word to Curt Fletcher—he's the sheriff down at Hardin. Seems to me the proper caper would be to bury him here—don't seem very smart to try to ship it plumb to New Mexico. I've got to find out, though. I wish we was on the railroad so's I could get through with a telegram."

"There's a telephone wire acrost the mountain," Highfoot said. "Yuh can phone a message to Spur Junction and have it telegraphed from there. Make out what yuh want sent and I'll see that it gets through."

He shoved paper and pencil at the cowboy and Marlow sat down at his desk. Carefully the big rider framed a message that seemed to cover what he had to say:

> Curt Fletcher, sheriff
> Hardin, N. M.
> Marlow killed in accident. Inquest tomorrow. Shall I plant him here.
> Jim Brendle.

NOT until the next morning did the answer come from Fletcher in New Mexico. Fat Sheriff Highfoot brought the answer up to Marlow in his hotel room. It read:

> Bury Marlow there. Bring back copy death certificate and coroner's report for court records. Fletcher.

So far there had been no question raised by anyone over the little matter of changed identity. By nightfall a man would be buried in Trail City's boothill cemetery, and the marker above his grave would bear Jim Marlow's name. Officially then the death of Jim Marlow would be an accomplished fact. Everything was running as he had contemplated. . . .

Everything, that was to say, except the matter of an old man who was dying on a ranch twelve miles from town, and a grave-faced, dark-eyed girl who had known too much of trouble already. . . .

That same morning Coroner Link Lennox held an inquest over the body of the dead lawman. It was brief, a cut-and-dried formality. The coroner had sent a man out to view the scene of the accident; the sheriff spoke of the known danger of the road at that point; the little coroner mumbled a few words; and the jury brought in its verdict:

We, members of the coroner's jury . . . find that the deceased met death as the result of an accident.

The coroner gave Jim Marlow a copy, duly attested.

A girl fell in step beside Marlow as he strode down wooden sidewalks after the inquest. It was Bunny, in riding garb. "I thought I'd come in and ride back with you," she said.

The big cow-puncher nodded uneasily. By nightfall Jim Brendle would be safely underground. What he would do then was still a puzzle to Jim Marlow. He looked at the girl thoughtfully. "I won't be able to go till pretty late," he said. "There's the funeral at three o'clock, and I've got some other business to take care of."

"I don't mind that," she said. "I got some things to do, myself. I'll wait for you. But what are you planning, Jim? About the ranch, I mean."

What was he planning? Jim Marlow didn't know. He was a wanted man, a man one jump ahead of a rope necktie —and this girl was asking him what he planned to do about a ranch!

"I'll have to figure that out, Bunny."

"I know. I'm awfully glad you're here, Jim."

What should he do? Cut and run for it—or stay and try to bluff it through? There was danger either way. He was used to danger, but he hated the thought of double-crossing a girl.

"I tell you what, Bunny," he said. "It's noon now. Take care of what you've got to do, and I'll meet you sometime after the funeral. There's several things I've got to see about."

"That's all right, Jim."

SHE left him at the corner. He went back to his hotel room and tried to build a plan.

"What the hell!" Jim Marlow said.

He made a sling out of a bandana neckerchief and shoved his right arm through it, and then he went down to the lobby. No one there, but he tinkled the bell on the desk, and the landlady came through from some back part of the building. She was a gray-haired, motherly little woman. Already Marlow had told her of yesterday's accident; now he indicated the sling around his arm.

"Guess I hurt my arm in that slide yesterday," he explained. "Started to write a letter and couldn't manage it. I got to get a report out to my boss and I was wondering if you'd write the letter for me."

"Of course." The landlady got paper and pen, and wrote at Marlow's dictation. The cowboy framed his words carefully, trying to make them sound like Jim Brendle:

Curt Fletcher, sheriff.
Hardin, New Mexico.

Friend Curt—I am sending you the death certificate and the coroner's report on Jim Marlow's death. It happened pretty sudden. We was riding around a mountain, and all of a sudden a chunk of the mountain came in on us. Marlow was killed outright, and I was bunged up a little. I got a bum arm out of it, which is why someone else is writing this letter for me.

Also, Curt, I am sending my resignation. My old man is in a pretty bad jam up here and it looks like I'll have to throw in with him for a while. Tell them at the hotel just to store my stuff. Also you might forward any money I got coming.

Yours truly,

"Now, if you'll address an envelope to that same party," Marlow said when he read the letter, "I reckon I'll be able to carve a signature on it."

He carried the letter back to his room. He had cleaned the dead deputy's clothes of papers and documents, and among them he found a copy of Brendle's signature. Carefully he traced a copy across the bottom of the letter. He slipped the coroner's report inside and sealed the envelope and dropped the letter in the hotel mailbox.

HE went out then and down the street to the bank, and there he placed on deposit the money lifted from Jim Brendle's money belt. It was three thousand dollars even, and he directed the cashier to place it to the credit of the Box D. Then he followed wooden sidewalks another block and came to the long and box-like building which housed the *Times*, the town's weekly newspaper. Behind a desk a little man with steel-rimmed spectacles looked up at him.

"When's the next paper come out?" Marlow asked.

"T'morrow."

"I want to run an ad," the cowboy said. "Something like this: 'The Box D wants cow-punchers. We're offering double pay, and we want men who aren't afraid of guns.' Can you rig up an ad like that and run it in big letters?"

The little man grinned. "Leave that to Jess Clagget. It'll be two dollars."

Marlow laid a ten-dollar bill on the desk. "Run it until I tell you to stop," he said. He went outside and stood for a moment on the steps of the newspaper office. The sidewalks were

empty, but two riders were jogging down the road in a little cloud of dust. Across the street he saw the swinging doors of a saloon. He crossed over and pushed through into the cool shadows of the barroom.

At the bar he ordered a drink. From the rear of the room floated the murmur of voices, the rattle of poker chips. A lone man stood at the far end of the bar, nursing a glass of whiskey. Not until the bartender had poured his drink did Jim Marlow recognize that man who drank alone. It was Duke Wetzel. Wetzel turned and looked at him, and then looked away deliberately; but that single instant was enough to show Marlow the expression of sardonic amusement on the gaunt man's face.

The big rider toyed with his drink. Across the room on the opposite wall was a kind of bulletin board. He glanced at the fat bartender.

"Mind if I put a sign on your board?"

The bartender shrugged. "There's the board, friend."

"I'll want paper and a pencil."

The bartender shoved paper at him and a stub of blue chalk. On the top of the polished bar Jim Marlow made his sign, while the fat man watched him curiously:

WANTED—COW-PUNCHERS
The Box D outfit is paying double wages to cow hands. You furnish the gun—we buy the ammunition. Apply the Box D. Jim Brendle.

He pinned the sign to the board with a thumb tack and went back to the bar. An ominous silence had settled over the long room. Duke Wetzel played with his drink. The fat bartender polished the bar nervously. Two men in dusty riding garb came through the swinging doors and swaggered to the bar. The bartender fumbled a glass and dropped it, and the small crash was loud in that silent room. The newcomers ordered whiskey.

Then one of the riders turned and saw the sign on the bulletin board. He was a lean slab of a man in bullhide chaps, with a slanted hatchet face stubbled with reddish beard. He rolled a cigarette, reading the sign.

"Did yuh see this, Duke?" he called suddenly, and then he reached up and jerked the sign from the board. He started toward the bar.

Marlow's voice stopped him. "Put it back," Marlow said.

The hatchet-faced rider stopped. He stood on braced legs, cigarette dangling from his lips, the paper in his hand. "What's that?" He stared at Marlow.

"Put it back," Marlow said.

"Tough hombre, eh?"

"Not tough," Marlow said gently. "I put that sign up. You took it down. Now I'm telling you to put it back again."

DEATHLY still, the room. Not a sound; not the least flutter of movement. Only the two men standing there, looking each other up and down. Duke Wetzel was a statue, a man who had turned to stone. Then the hatchet-faced rider dropped the paper. It fluttered to the sawdust.

"Yuh're Jim Brendle, I take it."

"I'm Jim Brendle," Marlow said.

He knew what was coming then. The old wolf-instinct of the hunted man was working overtime, and he knew what was coming seconds before it happened. Standing there watching the hatchet-faced rider, he yet had an exact picture of the room—of the ferret-faced rider at the bar waiting the play out, of Duke Wetzel standing motionless and imperturbable, of the bartender with his fat hands spread wide atop the bar. There were men behind him also, but those he would have to discount. He couldn't change his position now.

"Fill your hand!" the hatchet-faced man barked suddenly.

And his hand struck for the black

gun at his hip. But he was slow. He was far too slow. His gun was just clearing leather when Marlow's slug smashed into him and spun him half around. The gun slipped from nerveless fingers, dropped into the dirty sawdust. Hatchet-face clapped a hand over his right arm, shoulder high, and blood came oozing out between his fingers.

"Put it back," Marlow said.

The rider stared. Through the stubble of beard his face was white and sick with bullet shock. "My arm—"

"To hell with your arm! Put that sign back on the board!"

No move from Duke Wetzel, standing alone, watching the scene with cold, indifferent eyes. No move from the ferret-faced rider at the bar. Gray smoke curled upward from Marlow's gun, and his face was a stony mask. The wounded man stooped and picked the paper from the sawdust. He staggered slightly as he crossed the room, but somehow with one good hand he managed to thumb-tack it into place. There was a bloody smear across the paper now. The wounded man turned and pushed through the swinging doors, not looking back. The other rider was on his heels. Duke Wetzel downed his drink deliberately and spun a silver dollar on the bar and followed after them.

Jim Marlow sheathed his gun. A little murmur of voices lifted from the back end of the room. The fat bartender swabbed his brow with the bar towel. "She's clouding up for rain," he said, grimly nonchalant.

Jim Marlow agreed courteously, and then he downed his drink.

THEY buried the dead lawman in Trail City's little boothill cemetery that same afternoon. A minister who happened to be passing through spoke a few words at the grave. Bunny held Jim Marlow's arm as the pine box dropped from sight.

"It's sad, Jim," she whispered. "He was an outlaw, and all—but he's so far from home—from friends—" Her voice trailed off indistinctly, and her eyes were wet with tears.

Awkwardly he patted her hand. What would she have thought had she known that the dead man was Jim Brendle? Jim Marlow was beginning to hope that she would never need to know. He gave Link Lennox instructions to place a marker above the grave—a marker which declared Jim Marlow, the outlaw, dead.

The sun was dropping behind the mountain wall when man and girl left town. As they waited before the livery stable for the hostler to bring their mounts, a big, raw-boned puncher in levis detached himself from the stackade shadows to saunter up to Marlow.

"Yuh're the gent offering double pay for cow nurses?"

"'I'm the gent."

The man had a freckled face, a friendly grin. "Likewise, yuh're the gent who put on that ruckus in Egan's Bar today?"

"That's right."

The puncher grinned. "Put down my name. 'Spots' Engle. Likewise my pardner yonder. We're signing on. Might be we'll bring a couple more gents with us, none of which care much for Duke Wetzel. Will that be all right?"

"That'll be fine," Marlow said. He liked this big freckled rider's looks. "The more the merrier."

"*Bueno*. We'll be out tonight," the cowpuncher said as he departed.

Their horses waited. Bunny and Marlow swung into saddle, turned their mounts toward the ranch. The girl chattered of this and that as they rode, but the man at her side framed his answers in monosyllables. He was doing some heavy thinking.

Jim Marlow didn't know where he was going, but he had a hunch that he was on his way . . .

CHAPTER V
An Outlaw Shows His Hand

AND so Jim Marlow, for whom a rope necktie waited in New Mexico, set out to play a dead man's hand. He had started this play for purely selfish reasons, had been trapped in a scheme of his own device. But he knew now that he couldn't leave Bunny to deal with Duke Wetzel alone, and he knew he couldn't break faith with a dying man.

Old Jeff Brendle was dying. No doubt of that. Every day Doc Gentry made the long ride out from town, and every day his face was graver, and every night saw old Jeff a little closer to trail's end. There were times when he lay in a stupor, caught up half between life and death; but there were other times when he brightend and talked to Jim Marlow of things that had no meaning for the big cowboy. And Marlow sat at his bedside and nodded and grunted noncommittally, and it seemed to make old Jeff happy.

Meanwhile, the Box D hummed with activity. True to his promise Spots Engle had turned up the first night, and he brought three riders with him. Three more came the next day, and two the day after that, and Marlow put them all on the payroll. He was gathering horses for a remuda, getting the outfit ready for the roundup drive he hoped would beat a deadline.

By night of the second day his preparations had been completed. That night after supper he went out to the bunkhouse to have a talk with the men.

"We're bucking a deadline," he told them. "We've got just seventeen days to gather ten thousand dollars worth of beef. It's out there, scattered from hell to Hannah's back door. It won't be any picnic. Mebbe there'll be some shooting. Mebbe somebody'll get killed. It's fair you gents should know."

He looked around at them, dim shadows sprawled here and there in the light of the flickering bunkhouse lamp. A big, thick-bodied rider—he was Jones, on the payroll—shifted his bulk awkwardly.

"Forget it, Brendle," he drawled. "You're paying double wages. We never figgered yuh wanted us to pick strawberries. We'll go along with yuh."

Marlow nodded. "I want you to understand the play," he said. "If there's any bunch quitters I want to know it now."

Before daybreak the next morning little Pewee Barlin had the horses harnessed and the chuck wagon rolling and bouncing over the bunch grass toward the badlands. Bunny sat on a dancing horse in the chill dawn air and watched the riders working horses in the big corral. She turned her mount suddenly toward Marlow.

"We're going to make it, Jim. I know we're going to make it."

Marlow nodded grimly. "We'll do our best, Bunny." But this was just the start, and he couldn't see that far ahead. Winter, already late, was close at hand. A storm now would play hob with his plans; a blizzard might wreck them hopelessly. The threat of Duke Wetzel remained always in the background. Though he had made no move since Marlow's arrival, his men had stampeded a Box D herd once before, and they might try the same trick again. Jim Marlow didn't underestimate that baldheaded vulture of a man; he knew that Wetzel was always dangerous.

BUT days went by without event, and the chuck wagon wheeled closer and closer to the alkali of the desert wasteland, and the riders swung in long circles through canyons and brush-filled draws. The holding herd grew daily. The hours were dawn

to dark, and they double-guarded the herd at night, taking no chances against a sudden raid that might undo all their work. And nothing happened.

Marlow had made the freckled-faced Engle his segundo, his second in command, and as the days rolled he saw that he had chosen wisely. That big, grinning puncher savvied cows and men. And Marlow drove the men and drove himself; and sometimes he forgot that he was an outlaw, forgot that this was a game that would have to end some day. And every night he caught up a fresh horse and rode in to spend a little time visiting with old Jeff Brendle.

And one day, to satisfy a growing curiosity in his mind, he turned his horse toward that strip of road where a rock-slide had taken Jim Brendle's life. Searching patiently he found the charred remains of a length of dynamite fuse. He knew then that Jim Brendle's death had not been accidental. It had been murder. He remembered the gasping words of the dying deputy—

"That was Ben Dallas, after all."

Slowly Jim Marlow was dovetailing the pieces of a puzzle into place. Then there was that day when Bunny whirled up on a lathered horse. "You've got to come in, Jim!" she cried.

He looked at the girl's white face and needed to ask no questions. "Jeff's worse," he said.

"Doc Gentry's there," she said. "Doc says he can't last—that it's down to hours—"

He kneed his big horse closer to the girl's pony and put an arm around her shoulder. "Don't you cry now, honey. It's going to be all right."

"I won't cry," she whispered, and touched spurs to her horse. Side by side at a long, ground-covering jog they rode the broken, sage-dotted flats toward the Box D house. The day was chill, and winter was marching down from the high country.

Doc Gentry's light rig was pulled up in the yard. Man and girl left their mounts trailing reins before the porch and went into the house. Two men sat at Jeff Brendle's bedside, and fat Mrs. Barlin, the cook, was fluttering about uncertainly. Beside the doctor was a little man Marlow recognized as Sam Mayberry, justice of the peace in town.

From his pillow the old man looked up as they entered the room. His voice was pitifully weak.

"Yuh got him, Bunny," he said. "Come in, Jim. Set down here on the bed. I need your help, boy."

Marlow sat down. "Put a name to it, Jeff," he said.

"I'm making out my will."

"Your will?" Jim Marlow repeated.

"Doc says I better get her down," Jeff Brendle said. He chuckled, and the sound was no louder than dead leaves rustling in wind. "Doc's crazy. I'll live to plant posies on his grave. But he charges for advice, so I'm making out a will. That's why the judge is here."

He put out a fumbling hand. "How's this, boy? Half of everything to Bunny—half to you? What do yuh think of that?"

Marlow caught the withered hand between his palms. "Do this for me, Jeff. Make it to Bunny. Everything."

He saw little Judge Mayberry lift his head sharply and look at him and then drop his eyes again. For a moment the room was quiet. The doctor was sucking at an ancient pipe, and there was no other sound. Old Jeff Brendle turned his head painfully.

"Yuh want it that way, son?"

Bunny cried out sharply. "No—no—it isn't fair—"

Jim Marlow looked at her, and something in his grim face killed the protest on her lips. "Leave it to Bunny, Jeff," Jim Marlow said. "That's the fair thing. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Yuh heard that, Judge," the old

man said, and faint pride ran like a thread through his thin, tired voice. "Yuh heard my boy. Do it the way he says."

Then for a time there was only the scratching of a pen as the judge wrote steadily. He was through at last. He held the document up and waved it back and forth to dry the ink. He brought it to the bed, handed Jeff Brendle a pen.

"Sign 'er there, Jeff," he said. He held a book against the paper while old Jeff scrawled his signature. "Doc and Mrs. Barlin can witness it."

"Take care of it for me, Judge," Jeff Brendle whispered. "And now, if yuh two old buzzards don't mind, I'd like to talk to my kids alone."

The two old men filed out. Jeff Brendle closed his eyes, and opened them again. "What time is it, Jim?"

Marlow looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes to six, Jeff."

"I'm glad—glad I got to see yuh again, boy."

There was a queer, tight lump in Jim Marlow's throat. "I'm glad I got here, Jeff."

"Yuh take care of Bunny, boy. Promise me."

"I'll do my very best, Jeff."

"I know yuh will, son."

He died just as the clock in the hall outside struck six . . .

BUT the round-up went on. Jeff Brendle was dead, but that didn't change the calendar. It didn't change the note that Duke Wetzel held against the ranch; and now the time was perilously short. But every day the creaking old chuck wagon swung closer to the desert, and every night the herd bedded down on the holding ground was a little larger.

They buried Jeff Brendle on a sunny knoll behind the Box D house. People from fifty miles around rode in, and the yard before the big, square house filled up with buckboards and saddle horses. Jim Marlow damned the deadline and brought eight riders in for the services; but he left four others with Winchesters standing guard over the herd.

And that night, when the last visitor had departed, when his own punchers had ridden back to camp, he sat with Bunny on the porch. Quietly, not sparing himself, he told her what he had done. He told her of that day when a rock-slide had caught Jim Brendle and himself, and he told her it was Jim Brendle who had been killed. He told her how he had taken the badge from the dead man's vest and put it in his pocket, and how he had snapped a pair of handcuffs on the dead lawman's wrists.

"I never figured it would turn into anything like this," he said. "I just wanted to get away. But old Jeff seemed so glad to think I was his boy come back—and I couldn't seem to tell him that the boy was dead—"

She was sitting there quietly. So very quietly. He could see the lovely line of her profile, and moonlight had tangled in her dark curls. "It was a kindly thing," she said at long last. She shook her head uncomprehendingly. "I never thought—I didn't dream—" She broke off to turn and look at him. "An outlaw, Jim?"

He knew he was in love with her. It wasn't new; he had known it for a week. He knew there wasn't anything that he could hope to do about it, but the thought edged his words with bitterness.

"An outlaw," he said. "I killed a man. It was self defense—my life or his—but they made it murder when I went to trial. A gent who hated me swore my life away on the stand. He could have saved me. It was as simple as that, Bunny. Not that it makes much difference now—"

Her voice was low. "Why not let it go, Jim? Why not keep on—being Jim Brendle? Nobody knows here, and New Mexico's a long ways off, and no one's looking for you now."

He shook his head grimly. "It wouldn't work. Somebody'd come along soon or late. I'll see the round-up through and then I'll fade. The time is plenty short. You better have a power-of-attorney made out so I can act for you. If you'll trust me that far?"

"I'd trust you—farther than that, Jim," she whispered.

CHAPTER VI
Sidewinder's Trap

STILL Duke Wetzel made no overt move. It troubled Marlow because he couldn't understand it. On the second day after Jeff Brendle was buried the rider had occasion to go to town, and he stopped at little Jess Claggett's office long enough to tell the newspaperman to discontinue the ad in his paper. He was standing on the sidewalk talking to Claggett when he saw Duke Wetzel and Griffon come out of the hotel and start down the street toward him.

He forgot Claggett, watching them. It was the first time he had seen the huge Griffon since the night of the fight in the Box D kitchen. They came on, Duke Wetzel moving in his oddly sidelong gait, with his bony head thrust forward, and Griffon shuffling along beside him, as awkward afoot as a bear just learning to walk. Jim Marlow watched the pair with a close attention, but they passed him by without word or glance.

His eyes trailed after them. At the corner Wetzel said something to his companion, and then turned back along the wooden sidewalk. He pulled up before Marlow.

"When yuh starting your drive across the hill, Brendle?" he snapped.

The cowboy looked him up and down deliberately. Wetzel had an odd blotch across one temple—a small, brownish stain shaped almost exactly like an arrowhead. A birthmark, probably. There was a scar across his right cheek that looked like the furrowed path left by a bullet. All this Jim Marlow saw in the instant he was framing his reply.

"You know, Wetzel," he said then, "I'm damned if I can see how that could be any of your business."

There was mockery in the glassy eyes. "Mebbe not," Wetzel said. "Still, yuh gotta agree I hold a note agin yuh—and it's due in five more days—and then I'm moving in."

Marlow spoke softly. "You've asked a question. Now I'd like to ask one, Wetzel."

"Shoot," Duke Wetzel said.

The rider watched him. "Did you," he asked, "ever hear tell of a gent named Dallas? Ben Dallas?"

It was as though he had thrown a gun in the bald-headed man's face. For Wetzel stiffened, and flame flowed through the glassy eyes, and for a second Marlow thought he was going for his gun. It passed, and Wetzel's face was masked again, and his beady eyes were mocking.

"Never heard of him," he said without a sign of guilt.

But Marlow knew he was lying, and his mind slipped back to that day when a dying man had muttered through bloody lips: *"That was Ben Dallas, after all."*

The slide that had killed Jim Brendle had not been an accident. It had been murder. And Marlow wondered just how much Wetzel knew about that slide. . . .

Fat Sheriff Highfoot lumbered by, pulled a letter from his pocket. "Letter for yuh, Brendle. Come in my care." Marlow glanced at the envelope. It bore the return address of Curt Fletcher, sheriff down in New Mexico. He thanked the fat man and shoved the letter in his pocket. And then he turned back into the newspaper office to ask a question of little Jess Claggett, who was by trade a printer . . .

THE Box D gather stood in two herds at the edge of a desert waste. In one herd were the steers and everything that would pass for beef, in the other the culls and calf stuff. The chuck wagon rested in a hollow, with punchers gathered around. Round-up was over. In mid-afternoon Jim Marlow saddled a fresh horse and started for the Box D house.

Two hours later, easing his horse out of a canyon onto level plain, he saw a rider racing cross-country to intercept him. He pulled his horse down and waited. The rider he recognized as the ferret-faced companion of the man he had shot that day in town.

"Duke Wetzel wants to see yuh," Ferret-face said, keeping both hands on the saddle horn ostentatiously. "Sent me over to ask yuh to ride by the ranch if yuh had time."

"Wetzel knows where to find me," Marlow said curtly.

"I dunno." Ferret-face rolled a cigarette deliberately. "I'm just bringing the message. Duke said"—he licked the cigarette flap and watched Jim Marlow warily—"he said to tell yuh it was something about a gent named Marlow. He said yuh'd understand."

Marlow's face didn't change, altho the words hit as unexpectedly as a blow from behind.

Perhaps this was a trap. "Bueno," he said curtly. "I'll ride that way with you."

They rode in silence. They rode at last through a lane lined with cottonwoods and pulled up before the Anvil house. Duke Wetzel was waiting in the doorway.

"Glad yuh came, Brendle," he said pleasantly. "Come on inside."

Ferret-face faded toward the bunkhouse. Jim Marlow followed the gaunt man into a large and lofty living room. A pleasant room, with thick carpets on the floor, with pictures lining the walls, with flames in a great stone fireplace throwing out a cheery glow. Duke Wetzel pushed out a chair.

"Set down," he said.

Marlow lowered himself into the chair. "Your rider said you had something to tell me, Wetzel. What is it?"

Wetzel sat down. In the fireplace glow Marlow could see the odd, arrowhead-shaped blotch on his temple.

"Yuh're a sorta hasty gent, Brendle," Duke Wetzel said.

"What is it you had to tell me?"

"Several things." The bald-headed man straightened. "The first is that there's a gent standing right behind yuh. He's holding a shotgun six inches from your head!"

JIM Marlow turned his head. He saw a tall, dark man who must have moved in soundlessly on the thickly carpeted floor to take a position at his back. He saw the flash of white teeth, and light gleaming on the steel of a double-barreled shotgun. He looked at Wetzel.

"You're a cagy sort of gent, Wetzel."

"I'll get along," Wetzel said. "Take his gun, Manuel. Be careful—take no chances."

The muzzle of the scattergun shoved hard against Marlow's neck. He felt his gun lifted from holster. He didn't try to offer an objection. There wasn't very much that he could do just now.

"It's been pretty funny," Duke Wetzel said. "It's been better than any show—watching yuh gents breaking your necks raking in Box D beef—and knowing all the time that yuh was doing it for me."

"How did you figure that?"

With his bald head thrust forward, with his beady eyes gloating, Duke Wetzel looked more than ever like a buzzard. "Yuh poor damn fool!" he said. "That note comes due in three days. Who's going to pay it? Not Jeff Brendle, because he's dead. Not you,

because yuh'll be dead, likewise. That leaves the girl."

"That leaves the girl," Marlow repeated.

"I'll tell yuh something there, mister. The girl won't pay it either. My men picked her up today and took her outa circulation."

Marlow jerked erect in his chair. The gun behind jolted hard against his back at the sudden movement. His voice rasped in his throat. "You got—Bunny?"

"She's all right." Wetzel grinned, and it was like a wolf showing teeth in a snarl. "But she's outa circulation, and she won't never be back in time to take care of that note. Even if she had the dinero. And mebbe—mebbe she won't care about that note when she gets back."

The punchers fingers were biting into the chair. His voice was dry, harsh. "What have you done to her, Wetzel?"

"Don't let it worry yuh,." Duke Wetzel said. "Yuh got all the trouble yuh need without worrying about girls. Yuh had a lot o' fun. Yuh whipped one man and shot another, and I guess mebbe yuh figgered yuh was a sort of a one-man tornado. Yuh didn't know I was letting yuh go because it was better than any show. I guess mebbe yuh thought yuh had Duke Wetzel whipped."

"If you've done anything to Bunny," Jim Marlow said, icy-voiced, "you better tell this jasper behind me to squeeze the trigger now. Because, sure as hell, I'll kill you—"

"Yuh over-played your hand," Duke Wetzel said. "Yuh built up to a right nice stack. Yuh put handcuffs on a dead gent's wrists and made out that he was the outlaw and you was the lawman. And Bill Highfoot swallowed it, hide, horns, and tail, when all he had to do was go down a row of wanted posters and he'd have had yuh dead to rights. He didn't have that much sense. He took your word for it that the dead gent was named Marlow. I could have told him different."

"Why didn't you?"

The glassy eyes mocked him. "I knew Brendle in New Mex years ago. I knew yuh wasn't Brendle. I looked it up, and damned if yuh wasn't Marlow, with twenty-five hundred dollars on your head! Dead or alive!"

THE room was turning dark but Wetzel made no move to light a lamp. Flames from the open fireplace threw flickering shadows across the bony face. Jim Marlow sat there quietly, with the sure knowledge that his first false move would send buckshot crashing through his back.

"Yessir," Duke Wetzel gloated. "Yuh was a ring-tailed terror. Yuh was going to put the Box D on its feet again, and show Duke Wetzel a new trick. Yuh was a regular hero out of a story book. And all the time I was holding my men back—keeping them from killing yuh. Waiting to see how far yuh'd try to go."

The bald man fumbled in his clothes and found tobacco and rolled a cigarette. He lit the cigarette, and his hand brushed downward and came up with a gun.

"Matt Griffon was damn near crazy," he said. "It was all I could do to hold him—to keep him from gunning yuh."

"Which was damn kind," Marlow murmured.

"Yeah," said Wetzel. He blew out a thin stream of smoke. "I had to promise him the girl. He's crazy about that girl."

Jim Marlow's jaw clamped tight. A gun behind him, a gun in front—and this grinning, glassy-eyed old buzzard was telling him that he had promised Bunny to Matt Griffon! His brain caught for a moment on the remembered image of Griffon's face—on the beetling brows, the smashed nose, the thick lips curled back in a snarl. And

Wetzel had told him that Bunny had been captured, and there was no reason to doubt the bald man's word on that.

Duke Wetzel was holding this moment of triumph jealously. Drawing it out; savoring it to the full. He laid his gun on the table. "She figgers pretty neat. I'll tell Bill Highfoot yuh put up a fight and I had to kill yuh. The reward reads 'Dead Or Alive'."

Jim Marlow stood up, deliberately. The shotgun bored harder into his back. "There's one thing, Wetzel," Jim Marlow said. "It's troubled me all through. Mebbe I know the answer now, but I'm not sure. Your face turned yellow the other day when I mentioned a name. The name was Dallas—Ben Dallas. Why was that?"

He didn't care about the answer. He knew the answer already, almost certainly. He was stalling now. He was on his feet, and he was stalling; he was talking to give himself the instant that might mean life or death. For there was a chance here, a one-in-a-hundred chance even with the shotgun pushing hard against his back. If he could spin around fast enough and hit the barrel with his arm, he might knock it out of line before Manuel could pull the trigger.

If he missed—a blast of buckshot from the shotgun would cut him in two. But there wasn't any other way . . .

"I'll tell yuh about that," Duke Wetzel said. "Down in New Mex once I used that name. I didn't want it known. That's why I—"

He never finished it. Jim Marlow chose that instant to make his play.

JIM MARLOW whirled on one bootheel like a spinning top, and, spinning, his arm struck backward and hit the barrel of the shotgun. The shotgun roared. Luck rode with Marlow there. His arm, kicking back like a piston, had jolted the barrel out of line an instant before the shot. The buckshot missed him, tore a hole in the wall of the living room instead, and dark-faced Manuel had no chance to fire the second barrel. Marlow had the barrel in his hand. He jerked the Mexican toward him, and his right fist crashed with pile-driving force against the dark man's jaw and laid him unconscious on the floor.

The puncher had the shotgun now. Across the room Wetzel grabbed for the six-gun on the table. He got the gun and threw it up and thumbed one shot. But Marlow, shotgun swinging, was closing in on him fast, and the shot was hurried. Marlow felt a sharp stab of pain in his left arm, and then the stock of the swinging shotgun smashed against Wetzel's head with terrific force. The bald-headed Anvil man went down like a broken doll.

Marlow found his own Colt on the floor. Shotgun in one hand, Colt in the other, he crossed the living room in two swift strides. He threw the living room door open just as the ferret-faced rider who had carried Wetzel's message came running from the bunkhouse. Ferret-face had a Colt swinging in his hand. He saw Marlow in the living room doorway, and he threw his gun up and thumbed lead in a stream.

But he was firing fast, and wild. Jim Marlow took his time. He lifted the shotgun and lined the sights deliberately, and the charge of buckshot from the second barrel made a bloody pattern in the center of the ferret-faced rider's chest. He was dead when he hit the ground.

Dropping the shotgun, Marlow lingered briefly in the doorway. There was no further show of activity from the bunkhouse, and there seemed to be no more men about the ranch. He turned back to the living room. Wetzel was still out, stone cold, with blood trickling down his face, but Manuel was stirring on the floor. The dark man was shoving

himself slowly upward to his knees.

Jim Marlow reached down and grabbed him by the throat. "The girl, hombre—do you know where they took the girl?"

The dark man looked up at the swinging gun—at the cowboy's stony face. He paled visibly. Perhaps he understood that death was very close. He didn't try to lie.

"Yes, *señor,* I can tell you that. This place—"

Marlow jerked him violently to his feet. "Don't tell me, hombre—show me."

CHAPTER VII
Gates of Hell!

HE disarmed the trembling Mexican and stood him in a corner, then swung across the room to look at Wetzel, senseless still upon the floor. And the thought came that a bullet through Wetzel now might save a lot of trouble later; but he shook his head, knowing he couldn't do it that way. He stuck Manuel's Colt inside his waistband and shoved the man outside.

His own mount still waited, dragging reins, and two horses stood saddled before the bunkhouse door. He tied a lariat rope around Manuel's neck and put him in a saddle. Dusk was closing in over the range; it would be dark soon; and he meant to take no chances of losing his man.

In that fashion, with a rope around Manuel's neck and looped to Marlow's wrist, the two men rode away from the Anvil. Because he had to know surely that Bunny had been taken, the big cowboy set their course first for the Box D house. It was nearly four miles and they covered it at gallop. They raced down the lane, and Marlow saw the light shining through the kitchen window, and the wild hope stirred that Duke Wetzel had been lying, that he would find Bunny safe at home. They jerked their horses down at the kitchen door. Mrs. Barlin opened the door.

Marlow called out: "Where's Bunny?"

The cook came outside. "I don't know, Jim." Her voice was worried. "She rode toward Willow Spring at noon today, but she should have been back long ago."

So died the puncher's last slim hope. He knew Duke Wetzel had dealt out simple truth when he said Bunny was a prisoner. He spoke crisply: "You'll have to carry a message to the sheriff in town, Mrs. Barlin. Can you hold a gun in this jigger's back long enough for me to harness the team for you?"

"Of course, Jim."

He forced Manuel from the saddle, forced the dark man to lie face down on the ground. He passed the cook a gun. Then, working in feverish haste, he harnessed the team to the buckboard and whirled them into the yard.

He ran back. "Get up," he told the Mexican; and then: "This place you mention, where they took the girl. Where is it? I'm sending for the sheriff. Don't lie, because I'll kill you if you lie."

The dark man spoke swiftly, fearfully. "The shereef will know. It is w'at they call Croaker's cabin, because once a man named Croaker hid there from the law. That is truth, *señor.* The shereef will know."

Marlow looked at the cook. "Tell Highfoot that, Mrs. Barlin. Tell him Wetzel's crowd have kidnapped Bunny and taken her to Croaker's cabin, and tell him to grab some men and fan his tail that way. I'll be going on ahead."

She nodded understanding. "I'll tell him, Jim."

IT was nearly dark then, but as the two rider's turned their mounts toward the shadowed mountain wall

the moon lifted and filled the whole vast plain with a pale and silvery light. As they rode Jim Marlow shot questions at Manuel until at last he knew all that he needed to know. Croaker's cabin sat on a ridge at the head of a blind canyon. There was one trail by way of the canyon, and another that required a twenty-mile detour across the mountains. Four men, led by Matt Griffon, had been detailed to get the girl. Manuel thought it likely that a guard would be posted on the trail up through the canyon.

"That's where you'll come in," Marlow told him grimly. "If there's a guard tell him that Duke Wetzel sent us with a message for Griffon. I'll keep quiet. Make him believe it. One mistake, and you'll be the first to die."

The mountain wall laid a crescent shadow across the range, and in that shadow they rode until Manuel turned his head. "This is the canyon, *señor*."

That way they turned. The trail they found was narrow, a broken path skirting over a ragged ledge of rock. They rode in single file, the dark-faced man ahead. A mile they climbed, and another, with a big moon soaring higher in the sky to light up the rocky canyon floor below them.

Then, a voice came from somewhere above them and very close: "Raise your hands, gents. Pronto!"

In moonlight Marlow spurred his mount closer to the man ahead, and his gun jolted solidly against Manuel's back. From above came the warning voice, more urgent now:

"Damn yuh—lift your hands! And speak up."

Manuel's voice floated upward. "Be easy, Neely. It is I—Manuel Trujillo. Smoky rides with me. We 'ave the message from Duke to Griffon, if you will be so kind."

"That's yuh, Spig." The guard seemed relieved. "Damn me, yuh nearly got a slug through the brisket." He was clambering down from rocks above the trail. He came toward them, a rifle dangling in his hand. "What's up? I don't like this woman business—"

He wasn't six feet away when Marlow leaned forward in his saddle. Moonlight gleamed on the barrel of the six-gun in Marlow's hand. "It's your turn, Neely," he said softly. "Get your hands up. Pronto."

The man on foot stopped. In the moonlight his face was almost ludicrous as he stared at that levelled gun.

"Brendle! Jim Brendle!" he said.

"Put your hands up," Jim Marlow said, "or I'll kill you in your tracks."

The rifle dropped to the rocks. The man's hands lifted and he stood there staring at the gun. "Tie him up, Manuel," Marlow said. "Tie him and gag him, and do it right."

It was quickly done, there in moonlight on that narrow, rocky trail. Just as quickly was Manuel tied and gagged, with Jim Marlow performing the chore. The puncher was working in desperate haste. He left the horses standing in the trail beside the two bound men and pushed on his way afoot. He knew it wouldn't be much farther.

He didn't try to plan ahead. The time for plans was past. He knew that Bunny was a prisoner somewhere on this mountain top, and nothing else seemed to matter very much. He was himself an outlaw, a wanted man, and there wasn't anything that he could hope to win; but he knew he had to do his best for Bunny now . . .

HE came out atop the trail and saw the cabin, a tiny, box-shaped structure standing apart on a little knoll. There was bright moonlight and a hundred yards of open space to be crossed. He crossed it, walking fast. Here grass had found a foothold, and it made a carpet that

deadened the sound of his approach. He reached the shadow of the little cabin and pulled up there for a moment.

He had meant to reconnoiter briefly. But, even as he crouched in the half-dark in the shelter of the cabin, from within he heard a crash that might have been a chair knocked to the floor. He heard a woman cry out once. He knew it was Bunny's voice.

That ended plans. He stepped up onto the porch, crashed the door open with a single kick, marched inside. He had Manuel's six-gun in one hand, his own Colt in the other.

A man who must have been standing just within the door turned and stared stupidly at him. He was still staring when Jim Marlow shot him twice at point-blank range and stood there waiting for him to fall.

He felt drained of all emotion, cold as a chunk of ice. He wasn't a thinking, reasoning human being; he was a machine driving forward relentlessly, with death in either hand. Across a littered room a man sprawled on a bed tarp rolled desperately, tugging at his gun. He got the gun and came up on one elbow; but the stony-faced puncher in the doorway thumbed lead in a stream of fire, and the gun was never used. The man on the tarp sagged backward and lay still, his sightless eyes turned on the ceiling.

The hammer clicked on an empty shell and Marlow dropped the gun, mechanically shifting Manuel's Colt to his right hand. He was shuffling forward into the cabin, crowding in, searching every corner. Looking for Matt Griffon—looking for Bunny . . .

And then he saw them.

This was a two-room cabin, with an open arch between living room and kitchen. Through the open arch Jim Marlow could see into the smaller room, and he knew it was the kitchen. There was a cast-iron stove, with a pot of something simmering away on its top. He could see steam rising from the pot—could see the dancing flames through the open front door of the stove. He didn't see them consciously. They were there, and they made little marks across his brain, but he didn't know that he was seeing them.

Bunny and Matt Griffon were there beside the stove. Griffon was facing toward him, and Griffon had a gun in his hand, but for the moment he was powerless to use it because Bunny had grabbed his arm with both hands. Savagely, furiously, desperately, she was fighting to keep Griffon from lifting the gun. Even as Jim Marlow caught sight of them the huge man swung his arm and threw the girl spinning against the wall. He whirled to meet Jim Marlow.

But that was Griffon's mistake. When he threw the girl aside he threw away his chance at life. He freed his gun hand, but he made himself a target, and Marlow beat him to the shot. A slug crashed into the huge man as he brought his gun around. His gun hand sagged. On pillared legs he stood braced, mortally hurt, still trying to raise the gun. A second slug crashed into him. A third one . . .

Powder smoke filled the room. Still the huge man didn't drop. He rocked back on his heels, tottered there, fell back step by slow step on legs that had turned to rubber. He didn't fall—he wouldn't fall. Jim Marlow held his fire at last, watched that huge man with a kind of awe. Griffon brought up against the wall, braced his big shoulders there. His lips moved. His gasping voice held a faint surprise—

"Yuh—fooled me—twice—"

Then he went down. But even in that moment when he was dying on his feet Griffon found some deep reservoir of strength for the last act of his life. The gun still dangled in his hand. He managed to tilt the

barrel upward and get in one desperate, final shot.

Flame leaped from the barrel of his gun and broke with a roar that drove Marlow back on his heels, and then darkness closed over him.

CHAPTER VIII
Exposed!

SOMEONE was bathing his head, and somewhere a harsh voice was lifted unpleasantly. The words kept hammering against his brain, but they didn't seem to make much sense. He opened his eyes and it all came back to him, for he was still in Croaker's cabin. He was lying on the floor and Bunny was bathing his head with a cold, wet rag.

Then he recognized that grating voice. That was Duke Wetzel talking. "Don't be a bigger fool than was intended, Highfoot," Wetzel was saying. "I had no part in this. If Matt Griffon kidnapped the girl it was his own idea."

The cabin was full of men, so Marlow knew that the cook must have gotten through to Highfoot with her message and that the sheriff and a posse had reached the scene. But Duke Wetzel was here, too.

He saw Bunny looking down at him. He said: "What happened?" She kept on bathing his head. She said: "Lie still, Jim. Griffon's bullet grooved your head. You'll be all right."

He remembered that there was something he had to tell her. "Listen, Bunny," he said. "Reach in my vest pocket. There's a check for twelve thousand dollars in there, made out to you. Hagerty, the cattle buyer, came over from the Junction today and bought them steers on the spot. I had to shade the price but he'll make the drive himself."

That part of it was over and he wanted to get it off his mind. He could see the vast bulk of sheriff Highfoot's back. He heard Duke Wetzel's rasping voice. "I play a hard game, Highfoot, but I don't fool with women."

Marlow sat up suddenly. "You're a damn liar, Wetzel. You told me yourself that you had Bunny kidnapped."

All eyes turned his way. The fat sheriff stared. "What's that, Brendle? What's that yuh say?"

Duke Wetzel swayed forward into the light. "Yuh poor damn fool, Highfoot! Don't yuh savvy yet? That gent ain't Jim Brendle. Jim Brendle was killed in that slide. That gent's name is Marlow, and there's a price on him in New Mexico." He stopped at the table. "Look! Here's the poster, Highfoot. Hell, I got it from your own office!"

Marlow pushed himself to his feet, stood there swaying. Men were crowding around the table, looking down at a piece of paper. The bulky sheriff turned to study him. "This sure ticks you off, fellow," Highfoot said.

Marlow nodded easily. "Sure. That's me."

"Yuh're Marlow?"

"I'm Jim Marlow," the white faced puncher said grimly. He moved toward the table, fumbling in his pocket. "Here's another poster you'll want to see, sheriff."

Beside that poster on the table he laid a second sheet of paper. A piece of paper worn and frayed with handling, but clearly a Reward poster.

$5,000 REWARD

The above reward will be paid for the capture, dead or alive, of Ben Dallas, wanted for robbery and murder. Description: Height, about six feet one inch. Weight, one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Dark eyes; bald head. May be identified by small arrowhead-shaped birthmark on right temple. Has bullet scar across right cheek.

Address
Curt Fletcher, sheriff
Hardin, N. M.

For a moment, then, that cabin was wrapped in silence. All eyes had turned toward the bald-headed Anvil man, and every man there knew that this was a description of the one they had known as Duke Wetzel. Wetzel was backing away from the table. Under the telltale arrowhead blotch on his temple a vein throbbed steadily. His glassy black eyes seemed to flame. "That's a lie—a lie—"

THEY knew then, all of them, that it wasn't a lie. Guilt was stamped across his thin, cruel buzzard face. He was backing slowly like an old wolf backing up from a poisoned bait. And suddenly he whirled. "You'll never take me back—"

His gun was coming up when fat Sheriff Highfoot, with speed surprising, drew and fired in a single movement. The sheriff's slug crashed into Wetzel's chest and sent him plunging to the floor.

"I'm damned," the fat man said. He stood there looking down at the still figure on the floor, his moon face troubled. He turned and picked up the poster and read it through.

"I'm damned," he said again. "There's something funny—something wrong—"

Someone said: "What's wrong, Highfoot?"

"This poster," the fat sheriff said, and there was the beginning of excitement in his voice. "It says about a bullet scar. Wetzel had the scar, all right. He got it two years ago when Cherokee Quinlan took a shot at him. But—how in hell could that be part of a description that come out of New Mexico years ago?"

Jim Marlow's voice was tired. "That's easy, sheriff. It was my mistake. I threw that scar in when I had the poster printed."

The fat man's jaw sagged. "When —you had it printed—"

"Sure. I had Jess Claggett print that poster a couple of days ago. I roughed it up so it would look old. I was figuring to use it to throw a bluff into Wetzel."

He had known that Jim Brendle had been killed deliberately. He had been pretty sure that Brendle had recognized Wetzel on the day before the slide had killed him. That was all he'd had; the rest had merely been shrewd guesswork. But it had panned out.

The fat sheriff stared at him. "Yuh had Jess Claggett print that poster," he repeated. He shook his head slowly. "I reckon it was a mighty smart trick. It worked, anyhow. But, if you're Jim Marlow—"

Then Marlow felt a slight pressure on his arm and he turned to see Bunny looking up at him. "Go with him, Jim," she whispered. "We'll fight them. We'll never quit fighting until you're cleared."

She caught her two arms around his neck and pulled his head down and kissed him on the lips . . .

DAWN was breaking when the jail door clanged shut on Jim Marlow. Bunny had ridden in with the posse and kissed him again in sight of all of them just before he stepped into his cell. Fat Sheriff Highfoot locked the door behind him.

He sat down on the bunk. His head throbbed dully. He started to roll a cigarette and couldn't find tobacco. Wearily he searched his clothes again. He found no tobacco. He did find a letter . . .

For a moment it puzzled him. The letter was addressed to Jim Brendle, in care of Sheriff Highfoot. After painful thought he remembered that the fat man had handed him a letter two days ago. He had put the letter in his pocket, and then, in the press of more important business, he had forgotten it.

In the grey light of dawn he slit

the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper and a newspaper clipping. He started with the letter—

Friend Jim:

Your letter at hand and sure sorry to hear about Marlow getting killed and you getting binged up in that accident. Also sorry you're quitting, but if your old man needs you I reckon it can't be helped.

That's not why I'm writing, Jim. The thing is that Joe North had a bronc fall on him the other day. Smashed Joe pretty bad—he died that night. But before he died he ups and confesses that he lied at Marlow's trial. I am enclosing a clipping . . .

Jim Marlow quit the letter then, picked up the clipping. Headlines leaped out at him:

JOE NORTH KILLED IN ACCIDENT CLEARS MARLOW ON OLD MURDER CHARGE

As the result of injuries sustained when a bucking horse fell on him, Joe North, rancher on San Pete creek, died late yesterday evening at his home. Before his death, North, in an unusual deathbed statement, confessed that evidence given by him two years ago which resulted in the conviction of James Marlow for the murder of Henry Hagus, had been wholly false. North further stated that Marlow fired the fatal shot in self defense. An ironic touch is lent this case when it is recalled that Marlow, who escaped jail after his conviction, was killed last week in Colorado while being returned to New Mexico. The story of his death was told in these columns . . .

Jim Marlow put the clipping aside. He took off a boot and began hammering on the iron bars. He hammered long and lustily, and at last he heard steps on the stairs, and fat Sheriff Highfoot shoved into the corridor.

"What in hell's wrong?" he demanded.

"I want to get out of this bastile," Marlow said. He pushed the clipping through the bars. "Read that, Highfoot. Then open up this door or I'll take your damn hen-coop apart."

The sheriff read the clipping, slowly, carefully. His fat face beamed like a full moon. "Say! That's fine, Marlow—that's great!"

"Sure," Marlow said. "Open up—I want outa here."

"It ain't precisely accordin' to Hoyle," the fat man said, but he was fumbling with his keys. "Still, I reckon—"

The door opened. The cowboy stepped out. "Bunny rode toward the ranch, I reckon?" he asked.

"She headed out," Highfoot said.

"Is your bronc outside?"

"Yeah. I was just figgering to take him to the stable."

"I'll borrow him," Marlow said.

After the cowboy left, the sheriff read the clipping again and a sudden thought troubled him.

"My gosh!" he muttered. "I wonder if he had Jess Claggett print this thing, too?"

The beat of hoofs was fading in the distance . .

ROAD-AGENT SHERIFF

A Don Caballero Story

By

KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

They hid the dead man in the trees, above the reach of the coyotes.

BAT HALVERN unpinned his star, and dropped it into the vest pocket where he carried his makings. Then he lifted his bandanna mask to cover his face, touched the hooks to the bronc, and rode down through the sullen drizzle to the Chinwhisker's Rocky Ford.

But the hombres who were crossing didn't spot him—they had their hands full, trying to control the spooked-up pinto which they had led down into the river.

The pinto had reason to be spooked. Tied across the saddle, arms and legs limply dangling, was a dead man! A short length of rope, frayed at the end where somebody had slashed it while the man's weight still was upon it, trailed from the corpse's neck.

And no range bronc born ever liked the smell of death. The pinto's flailing hoofs sent water spurting high, deluged the two riders.

Frang Mattsar cursed, struck savagely at the pinto with a loaded blacksnake whip.

Halvern's jaw muscles hardened under his bandanna. He hauled his hardware, thumbed back the hammer with a decisive little click, and stated, "That'll be plenty, Mattsar."

The sleek boss of the Chinwhisker country, who always looked like a beaver coming out of water, let his blacksnake trail and twisted abruptly in his expensive hull. His brittle gaze raked through the drizzle, located and appraised the masked man on the shore.

Ed Laye, Mattsar's eternally complaining sidekick, made a morose sound far down in his sunken chest, and made a tentative move toward his iron.

But Mattsar stopped that with a quick, incisive gesture. "Who in hell are you?" he flung at Halvern.

"I ain't asked *you* any questions," reproved the sheriff gently. "I'm tellin' you to fetch that pinto over here, leave him ground-hitched, an' roll yore tails."

Mattsar's sharp little moustache twitched. "Lissen, you two-bit road agent—we'll fork over what money we got, but damned if we'll give up this corpse. He's no good to you—unless you're aimin' to help Lee Trent—" That idea seemed to disturb Mattsar. He settled stubbornly in his saddle. "If that's the play, yo're needin' more'n a smokepole to put it over!"

Halvern tipped his head a little farther forward, so that its five-inch brim would better shadow his eyes.

"I'm in a mood to augur that some now," he stated, swinging his gun significantly. "Yore move, gents."

MATTSAR snarled, "I sure don't savvy yore game, stranger. But —take him, Ed!"

The stooped gunhawk sucked in his cheeks, made a stab for his iron. But Halvern's six-gun was centered on his sunken chest; and a subtle stirring, in the willows on the far side of the ford, completed the job of unnerving the gunhawk. He veered his hand away from his smokewagon as if he'd found the weapon red hot. "He's got the drop, Frang," Laye complained in his acid voice. "An' they's somebody over there in the brush, backin' his play."

Mattsar quivered with wrath. "By hell, stranger, if you think to get away with this, yo're some wrong. We'll get help from town!"

Halvern gestured commandingly with his gun. "I said, fetch the pinto over here, leave him, an' fog it!"

They did that. And when they were gone into the gray drizzle Halvern squinted hard at the willows. But there was no sign of life over there now.

The sheriff spurred forward, caught up the hackamore rope before the pinto could make up his mind to bolt, and led the gruesomely burdened bronc back across the ford. He rode through the willows, found nothing but some fresh sign that might or might not have been made by Mattsar and Laye. If someone had been watching from here, he could easily have escaped under cover of the rain, while Halvern's attention was centered on the departing Mattsar.

The sheriff shrugged. He was masked—and this wasn't his own outfit which he wore. He figured he was safe enough.

Jogging through the rain in the general direction of the Wing C spread, Halvern slipped off his sodden mask, thrust long fingers into his vest pocket to make sure his star was there.

It wasn't. Shocked, he dug deeper, fumbled, but it was no dice. The star must have worked out of the shallow pocket when he leaned down to pick up the pinto's lead-rope.

In a little draw he halted the broncs,

put his hand on the high cantle of his tree, twisted around. It would be best to go back, he figured, and pick up that telltale star before somebody else found it. If Chinwhisker folks discovered that their sheriff had dabbled in road-agent work they'd be nasty.

But before he could rein his bronc around, a shrill, warning voice reached down to him, from one edge of the draw.

"Jus' freeze w'ere you are at, *hombrecito!* The star—I 'ave eet!"

On the last words the voice dropped to a forbidding, bullfrog croak, and Halvern's stunned glance located its owner.

The man was a gaudy little Mexican, with a *serape* pulled tight about his shoulders against the rain, a huge straw sombrero that dripped water from its brim, and a gold-plated gun which pointed at Halvern unwaveringly with its round black muzzle.

The Mexican let go a smile that was a gleaming masterpiece against his dark skin. "'Ave not the fear, Señor. Me, I am Rabon, the *caballero*. I not shoot you, maybe. The gon, drop heem on groun'."

Halvern knew enough to stand without hitching when another man had the drop. He did as he was told.

The Mexican produced the star. "I went back an' got eet, after you lef'," he said. "Shereef, Chinwheesker County, ha? By hell, thees ees firs' time Rabon 'ave see a shereef shuck hees star for a mask!"

"Fork over my star!" Halvern said wrathfully. "Snoopin' into other folks' business'll get yuh a heap of trouble, one day!"

Rabon lifted his eyebrows in an expression of pained reproof.

"*Hombrecito!* Ees not proper, to suspec' a *caballero*. I am a *hombre* w'at got honor—an' weeth me, ees business proposition. I 'ave catch you, the *Senor* Shereef, pull something you maybe wan' to keep *muy* quiet, ha? Well, eet cos' you something now!"

Anger pulsed along Halvern's temples. "Why you sawed-off son, I got no money! Been so long since I had any foldin' green—"

Rabon looked pained. "But you are the shereef—always the shereef got money. Ees good business."

"Not in this case," Halvern stated grimly. "Mattsar seen to that. When he started his war against Lee Trent he figured that maybe I'd favor Lee some, me'n the kid havin' been pards at mustangin' a while back. So to squeeze me out of office, Mattsar brought some kind of a fancy lawsuit, kept the county commissioners from payin' me."

Rabon twirled his gun deftly, pushed back his sombrero with the muzzle of it. "Damn! Always, I pick the wrong en' of the setup!" But he touched spurs to his bronc, and with his twenty-six-inch, silver-studded tapaderos flapping he came down into the gully. Keeping Halvern covered, he leaned from his hand-tooled saddle and picked up the sheriff's gun. "Well," he said, with the resignation of a philosopher, "we go along together anyway—you, me, an' the *Senor* Corpse. Maybe you 'ave lie to me," he added hopefully.

Halvern was in no mood to pass remarks. And the little Mex shrugged, peered down at the dead man. Rainwater dripped endlessly from the corpse's down hanging hair—and as the high-strung pinto moved, the dead man's head and arms wabbled erratically.

Rabon shuddered, straightened quickly. "Damn, ees a hell of a poor business, weeth only the *Señor* Corpse for the loot. How come he to be geev' the 'ang?"

"Downright simple," Halvern stated savagely. "My pard, when the wild-horse business folded up on us, went to work for old Charley Vare. Charley ran the Wing C brand on this side

of the Chinwhisker. The dry years come on, an' Mattsar decided he needed Charley's water-holes plumb bad—we found old Charley up in Cottonwood Coulee, shot in the back.

"Lee reared up on his hind legs an' demanded I jug the whole Mattsar outfit. Which I couldn't nowise do, there bein' not a shred of evidence to back the play. So Lee cussed me out, went plumb on the prod with the idea of executin' every Mattsar gunhawk he can catch alone. Last night, he glomed onto his first customer. I ain't sayin' that this jasper didn't get his just deservin's, because he did—but that don't alter the fact that Mattsar can make what Lee done look mighty like murder, in a court.

"I found out about it, but what can I do? Neither that maverick pard of mine, nor Charley Vare's gal, will listen to horse sense. Best I could do was lift the corpse before Mattsar got it to town. No corpse, no murder case. So states the law."

Rabon's interest perked up visibly. "By damn, maybe I like thees yet! The *Señorita* Vare, ees w'at you call the looker, ha?"

Humor tugged at Bat Halvern's gaunt, virile unhandsome face. "A looker, yeah! A highbinder blonde—she an' Lee make a pair for the book. Why, compared to that gal for temperament, a choya cactus is a plumb piker."

Rabon's jet-black eyes, very bright under lifted brows, regarded Halvern. "For the *caballero, Señor,* eet need the thorns among the flower', for make life 'ave the interes'. *Verdad!*" The Mexican tilted his head slyly. "An' thees *Señorita,* she 'ave maybe urge your frien' on, agains' Mattsar? So now, though you know he ees catch up fas' weeth trouble, you can't stop heem so good, ha?"

"You're callin' the turn plumb uncanny," Halvern said bitterly. "But I sure don't savvy why I should be confidin' all this to you."

Rabon's grin was broad, dazzling. "*Señor,* for the *caballero,* you 'ave the trus' which come from the 'eart, *verdad!* You can't help eet, *sabe?* Now, Rabon help you plenty. But—" The Mexican's voice dropped once again to that forbidding, bullfrog-in-a-barrel croak, and he gestured with the gold-plated six-gun. "Remember well, *hombrecito*—ees business proposition weeth me. Ees goin' to cos' somebody plenty!"

"Well," Halvern said, "I ain't in a position to object much, seems like. But if we're goin' to the Wing C, we got to get rid of this corpse."

"*Verdad!*" agreed the Mexican.

THEY cached the dead man in a boxelder, above the reach of coyotes. And then they jogged through the dwindling drizzle to the Wing C.

Stubbornly defying Mattsar, young Trent and Charley Vare's girl were holding down this spread. Not that there was much left to hold—Frang's men, working always in such a way that Halvern had no evidence to act upon, had stampeded the Wing C herd over a cliff, had scattered Vare's remuda over all the Chinwhisker country, had persuaded the Wing C hands that far ranges would be a heap healthier. About all that was left was the severely tidy log house, a big water-hole that was looped by a five-strand barb fence, a bunkhouse where Lee Trent rattled around in the emptiness, and some sheds.

But from this husk of a ranch, Trent and the girl didn't intend to be pried loose.

They threw a couple of warning shots uncommonly close to Halvern and Rabon. The little Mexican, riding slightly behind the sheriff and still covering Halvern with the gold-plated persuader, gave a sharp cry.

"By damn, *hombrecito,* ees business w'at they mean! I thought you 'ave say they know you, ha?"

"Not in this get-up," Halvern said ruefully, glancing down at the bull-hide chaps, the ragged blue Levis, and the faded tan shirt with which, in order to fool Mattsar, he had replaced his own somber but neat black outfit.

The sheriff lifted a hand, called to Trent. And then, with the Mexican closely following, he rode to the ranch house.

Trent and the girl came out to meet the riders. Trent was a match for Halvern when it came to height, though somewhat heavier than the gaunt, dark sheriff. The youngster's hat habitually was tilted back on his head, revealing his blond hair that was as kinky as a bronc on a cold morning. In his every move there was a restless, driving urgency, and in his blue eyes, as he regarded Rabon, there was distrust.

But Rabon wasn't noticing that. The rain had stopped and the little Mex smiled broadly down to Ann Vare.

The girl lifted her determined little chin. Her manner was as coldly distant as the snow-capped peaks of the Blues.

Halvern grinned, moved easily in his saddle. "Like to make you acquainted with Mister Rabon, folks. Miss Vare, an' Lee Trent."

Rabon lifted his sombrero, let it hang at his back, supported by the whangstring which passed under his chin. His glistening black head bobbed as he bowed in his most gracious manner.

But Lee Trent kept eyeing that gold-plated smokepole.

"What's the idea," he demanded, "of coverin' Bat?"

Rabon grinned, shrugged. "Ees jus' the small matter of business. But w'en the eye of a *caballero* ees delight' weeth see the mos' beautiful *Señorita* thees side of old *Mejico*, how can he theenk any more of the business?" With his finger through the trigger guard Rabon spun the resplendent weapon, holstered it.

"Okay," Trent said unwillingly. "Climb down, if yuh want."

They did that, pronto. And, leaving Rabon to talk to the girl, Bat Halvern backed young Trent against the pole corral and proceeded to tear into him.

"You bow-laigged fool! Ed Laye found that hombre yuh string up—I heard him yellin' when he fogged into town to tell Mattsar. Everybody knows you done it, after the way you been shootin' off yore mouth. Now Mattsar's got yuh where he wants yuh, plumb—you've done murder."

"That ain't what I call it!" retorted Trent angrily. "You've run yore heels over dodgin' this thing—which leaves it up to me to square the books for pore ol' Charley."

Halvern didn't exactly cotton to that reflection upon his own courage. "Yuh stubborn dang jughaid, can't yuh see the law's a knife that cuts both goin' an' comin'? I can't grab Mattsar without I got proof against him. Now, you've given him proof that he can use to force me to act against you!"

Trent's face had that bitterness of youth which has found a fanatically worshipped idol to be just clay after all. "Sure," he retorted. "Ever since they went an' hung that tin star on yuh, you been a changed man. You palaver about yore duty—an' ol' Charley rots in his grave. I'm sure surprised."

Halvern saw that Ann Vare had left Rabon and was walking toward the Wing C house.

"How about her?" he demanded. "You told her what yuh done last night?"

"What do you take me for?" Trent snapped. "It ain't for a woman to worry. What I'm wonderin' is, where does that decorated greaser fit into this? How come yo're decked out so outlandish? How come the Mex to be holdin' an iron in yuh? An' where'd

yuh rustle the pinto? If I ain't blind, he packs a Mattsar burn."

Before Halvern could answer, Rabon came waddling to the corral. The little Mexican was grinning broadly. "The *Señorita,* she insis' we stay, feed the face some. She 'ave go feex the grub now."

Trent gave the Mex a smoldering glance. But Rabon's dazzling smile did not slacken—and for a moment the two of them remained thus, locked in a clash of wills.

Finally, Trent wheeled away. "Miss Ann's the boss of this spread," he flung over his shoulder. "If yo're stayin', better put up yore broncs. I got to go fix the roof of the powder shed—it's been leakin' some, in the rain."

Trent's shoulders swayed as he headed toward the distant shed with the ungainly waddle of a man who has spent most of his life in the saddle. Halvern noticed that the youngster's face was twitching—and in his anger, Trent seemed to have forgotten the questions he'd asked.

RABON'S voice was a low, gently confidential croak.

"Ees something w'at hit a man w'ere eet hurt, w'en the frien' turn the back, *no es verdad?* But I theenk mos'ly he ees angry weeth me, because I 'ave give to the *Señorita* the smile an' because she 'ave ask us to stay. Nobody seem to understan', *Señor,* that een the blood of a *caballero* ees something w'at make heem give always the bow, the smile to the lovely lady. Eet mean nothing—but eet make a heap of the trouble." The Mexican sighed. *"Hombrecito,* w'en the young *Señor* go on the prod eet make no good to talk. He got to get eet ut of hees system, the same like horse w'at 'ave eat the loco weed."

"An' get hisself killed off doin' it?" Halvern retorted. "I'd give anything I got or hope to get, could I stop that fool rannihan before it's too late. Given time, I can get the goods on Mattsar. But tryin' to stop him in the open is like buckin' a stampede when yo're afoot."

Rabon squinted critically toward Halvern's gaunt face. *"Señor,* I figure Trent ees like the *hijo,* the son, to you—*verdad?* An' down eenside, you 'ave the hanker to cut loose an' raise plenty hell, the same like he ees doing. But your star, she keep you hobble, mainly because you wan' be the good example for your frien'. You 'ave not tell heem about you steal the corpse, ha?"

"Yo're callin' the turn again," Halvern admitted. "I sure didn't tell him—if he knowed that he'd jump straight to the conclusion that I'd back any fool play he saw fit tuh make. An' wild horses couldn't hold him. I've thought some of runnin' him in for safekeepin'—but our hoosegow's a pore excuse for same, an' I got no deputies Mattsar'd have a lynch mob on the prowl inside of an hour. Moreover, he'll likely be showin' up here pronto."

"Ees mos' bad," said Rabon sympathetically. "But *hombrecito,* you are a *caballero* too—you an' me, we work together, ha? Maybe you help the frien', maybe I pick up the small profit een the business way. But now we got to take care of the broncs, ha? Because, ain't eet from the top of the bronc that the *caballero,* the gentleman of the saddle, do all hees work? Got to take care of the bronc, the same like the gon. *Verdad!"*

THEY put the horses in the corral, loosened the cinches, and pitched a forkful of hay to each mount. They perched on the opera house rail, and were discussing the good and bad points of the handful of broncs that were left to the Wing C, when suddenly Rabon drew his gun.

"Hombrecito!" he croaked. "Eet make the bad news—we got company."

Startled, Halvern swung about and saw that a strung-out bunch of riders was snaking swiftly through the sagebrush, heading toward the Wing C.

The sheriff gripped Rabon's arm. "Mattsar's bunch, got here a'ready, from town! Fork over my star, mister —I got things to do!"

There was something grim in Halvern's manner which made one point clear—it wouldn't be wise to buck his will. Rabon saw that, and handed over the star. He did more—he hauled Halvern's smokepole from the folds of the gaudy serape, and returned the weapon to the sheriff.

Halvern jumped to the ground, lined out at a long-legged run for the powder shed. Rabon, with silver-mounted spurs tinkling musically, followed along as best he could.

But they didn't find Trent at the powder shed. They found him out behind the bunkhouse, hunkered over a small fire. The ranchman was drawing a new rope through the flames, to singe off the "whiskers" which would slow the lass's action through the *honda*.

"Gettin' ready for yore next customer?" challenged Halvern. "Ain't likely you'll get a chance to use that rope—Mattsar's comin' hell-bent, with his whole outfit backin' him."

In one smooth move, Trent came to his feet and drew his iron and started to lunge past the sheriff. But Halvern reached out and stopped him. And for a moment the two, straining, faced each other.

"Don't be a fool, kid," Halvern begged. "Let me handle this my way."

"Yore way!" Trent flared. His young face was ruddy with wrath; and in his eyes there was stinging disdain. "Damn yuh, lemme by! I'm settlin' with them coyotes—" He wrenched free of Halvern's grip and was gone, legging it toward the log ranch house.

Rabon kicked the fire apart. Halvern staring down at the smoldering embers, said, "Hell, I never figured Mattsar'd get here so all-fired quick. Reckoned on havin' time to make Lee listen some, an' maybe to chouse him out of here. Now, with that pinto in the corral, there's slim chance that I can make my authority stick. Only thing to do is burn powder, seems like."

"My business ees mos'ly hire out the gon," Rabon said soberly. "And I 'ave learn that nobody but the fool buck the long odd. Ees mos' bes' to whittle them down some. *Señor,* I theenk—"

The ugly crash of gunfire lifted and echoed across the ranch yard.

Halvern wheeled. "We got to help them fool kids!" he said. And without paying any further attention to the little Mexican, the sheriff darted around the corner of the bunkhouse.

By the gunsmoke which eddied from a rifle-slot in the log wall of the house, and by the fact that Frang Mattsar's bunch was making full use of the cover afforded by the hummocky ground as they ringed the ranch, Halvern got the lay of things. Lee Trent and old man Vare's daughter were forted up, and had started shooting.

So far, they'd done no damage, had drawn only mocking yells from the Mattsar men.

Halvern darted across the open space, hit the ranch house porch. Ann Vare opened the door for him.

In the cool gloom, Trent swung from a rifle slot, leveled a 30-30 as he glared at the sheriff.

"Plumb surprised yuh didn't fog it," Trent said acidly. "Where's yore greaser friend?"

Halvern had been so downright concerned about the pair in the house that he hadn't noticed, until now, that Rabon was not with him. But he let that matter slide—he had felt an odd sort of kinship for the gaudy little *caballero,* but now, regretfully, he put the man down for just an-

other of those fancy hombres who fold when the going gets tough.

"Never mind Rabon," he told Trent. "Put down that rifle."

Ann Vare grabbed Halvern's arm, pulled him around. There were bright, angry spots of color in her cheeks. "Why should he do that?" she demanded. "You want us to knuckle under to those coyotes? Dad would never have done that!"

"There's law on the Chinwhisker now," said Halvern, as gently as he could. "I aim to make it stick—all ways. Lee, hand over that rifle."

Trent's face, in the gloom, was taut with anxiety and rage. "Reckon yuh'll have to take it," he challenged.

Halvern's gaunt frame straightened and then, with a sigh, he strode forward, laid hold of the rifle.

Savagely, Trent struck at him. Halvern dodged—the kid, he saw, was all stampeded. Vainly, Halvern wrestled with the problem of handling him.

But the sound of a shout reached in through the rifle slots. And both Trent and Halvern stiffened, listened.

IT was the shrill voice of Rabon. "*Señor* Mattsar! I wan' to make weeth you the *habla*—ees mos' importan'!"

Halvern let go of Trent's rifle, and peered through the nearest slot. The range of vision was narrow, but sufficient for the sheriff to see the stocky, resplendent Mexican, who was out in the ranchyard halfway between the house and the nearest Mattsar men. The threatening rifles of the raiders seemed to disturb Rabon not at all—he tilted his sombrero to a jaunty angle, and waited for an answer.

Mattsar reined his horse cautiously to the top of a hummock. "Speak yore piece, greaser!"

"Ees simple," Rabon yelled back. "Ees goin' to be a fight here. An' me, I am the bes' *hombre* thees side of the Rio to 'ave aroun' een such case. I 'ave see w'at happen at the ford, *Señor*—I know who eet was w'at rob you. But I am a business man. The *hombre* w'at pay me mos', ees the hombre I work for."

Mattsar rose slightly in his stirrups. "Wait a minute—let's get this straight. Was it you in them willows? How do I know you ain't aimin' to run a whizzer for Trent, an'—"

"*Si, Señor,*" interrupted Rabon hastily. "I was een willow. I work for you, ha?"

Mattsar looked around some. "There's the pinto, in the corral, boys!" he yelled suddenly. "By damn, we got Halvern where we want him now—mighty good thing you boys seen him sneak out of town, an' made up yore minds to follow him in time so you met me halfway. I been waitin' long for this!" Then he said to Rabon: "You come here. I'll pay you twenty bucks to work for me."

But Rabon wheeled back toward the Wing C house. "You een the *casa!*" he called. "Maybe you raise the ante some, ha?"

The Mexican's earnestness drew an ugly round of laughter from the raiders. Even Mattsar joined in.

"Why yuh dirty little coyote!" Trent howled, lifting the 30-30. "I'll give yuh somethin'—"

"None of that," warned Halvern icily.

Trent turned an angry, rebellious face. "You lettin' that Mex sell us out?" he demanded. "What was it happened at the ford, anyhow? Yuh might tell a man—"

"Never mind that now," Halvern ordered. "I ticket Rabon for not half the dangerous hombre he lets on to be."

"Which doesn't change one fact," Charley Vare's girl retorted, as she jammed cartridges into a spare rifle. "Neither you nor anybody else is going to make me give up Dad's spread."

"Didn't ever intend that," Halvern stated. But, against the hot fervor of

youth, his words made little impression. The girl's chin was defiantly high, her eyes were bright with excitement. She'd make highbinder Lee Trent a partner for the book, if the salty young fool lived long enough. The sheriff intended that Trent should.

And Halvern peered again through the slot. He saw that although Mattsar was urging Rabon to come out to the raider bunch immediately, the Mexican was hauling back some.

"Got to get the *caballo* firs'," Rabon called. "*Por què* how een hell can the *caballero* work, weethout hees fork the bronc?"

He waddled to the corral, took down the gate-poles, dabbed a loop neatly on his bronc. And then, with taps swinging rhythmically, he rode out to the scowling, suspicious Mattsar.

TRENT'S mouth was drawn to a white line. "What now, Bat? Do I line one on yore greaser?"

"No," Halvern warned. And in a tense, ominous silence Trent and the sheriff peered through the slots.

Rabon and Mattsar palavered for a while and then a couple of Frang's hombres broke away from the little group and headed for the powder shed.

Trent cursed. "The greaser's put 'em wise to the dynamite! They'll use it to blow us out of here!"

Halvern swung deliberately, took the spare rifle from Ann Vare's hands. Somehow, he felt vaguely disappointed by Rabon's action—and the girl's accusing eyes bothered him. He thrust the rifle through a slot, fired at the hombres who had lined out for the shed.

Eagerly, Lee Trent joined in, slammed four shots in rapid succession. But it was no go. The powder shed, naturally, was placed some distance from the other ranch buildings—a long half mile from the house—and the raiders were making shrewd use of a little draw which gave them cover. Trent's slugs, and Halvern's, merely kicked up gravel and knocked dust from sagebrush.

Their firing drew an answer, though, from Mattsar's bunch. Rifle slugs howled, thudded into the log walls of the Wing C house, into the heavy shutters which Trent and the girl had closed. One slug, striking the part of the stovepipe which projected from the roof, knocked down a mass of soot which spurted out at the edges of the stove lids.

Lee Trent howled defiance, wasted considerable shells in firing at Mattsar. But the boss of the Chinwhisker, together with Rabon, had taken to cover behind the hummocks.

Halvern was too old a hand to waste shells on such elusive targets. He circulated around, squinted through the rifle slots at the rear of the house.

Mattsar men were out there but they were doing no shooting. Instead, they were furtively pulling out, circling back toward the hummocks, out in front of the house, where Mattsar had holed up. Halvern squinted for a moment, then darted back to Trent.

"Here's yore chance!" he told the younger man. "Frang's pullin' his gunhawks from the back of the house—you an' Miss Ann can fog it, get clear of this—"

"Not any!" the girl retorted. "I'm staying right here."

"Which goes double for me," Trent added.

Halvern looked keenly at them, and tried to keep from showing the admiration which he felt. "You two," he stated, "are the most hell-for-stubborn pair I ever laid eyes—"

"Look!" interrupted Trent.

Through a slot Halvern saw that the two men who had pilgrimed to the powder shed had returned to the main group. And now Rabon, with a box of powder under one arm and a shovel across his saddle, was striking

out, keeping behind cover as much as possible as he circled toward the back of the house. The move was furtive, sneaky and Halvern has just one fleeting glimpse of the gaudy Mexican. But that one glimpse was plenty.

Trent's rifle crashed angrily and the shot drew an answering blast of gunfire from the Mattsar bunch.

Under the fury of it, the Wing C house seemed to shudder. Dishes rattled in the cupboard. Ricochets spanged and wailed. Lee Trent, with little beads of sweat gleaming on his young face, levered and fired as rapidly as he could—and swore when he saw that his slugs were doing nothing better than tear up the dirt.

To Halvern, this play was clear enough. Mattsar had massed his men in one bunch, in front of the house, in order to keep the Wing C folks mighty busy while Rabon sneaked around to the rear and planted the powder. It seemed peculiar that Rabon had let himself be seen by those in the house, but there was no time to whittle at details now.

Halvern rose, grim and seemingly more gaunt than ever.

"Quit wastin' powder!" he hurled at Trent. "It's my job to stop this, happen so—I'm goin' out there!"

"You can't—they'll kill you!" A quick, womanly concern drove the words from Ann Vare.

Halvern grinned down at her, crookedly. "Not if I can help it."

HE laid hold of the door, swung it open, stepped out onto the porch. "Mattsar!" he roared.

The boss of the Chinwhisker yelled a command and as the firing of his gunhawks tapered off, the shrill whinny of a horse which was ground-hitched out beyond the hummocks echoed across the Wing C yard.

"What'll you have?" Mattsar demanded.

Halvern rubbed his shirt-sleeve down across his star. "I'm orderin' yuh, in the name of the law, to stop this fool play."

That drew a chorus of derisive hoots. "The road-agent sheriff!" Mattsar yelled. "Be hell, the greaser was right—it was Halvern hidin' behind that mask, when he held up Ed an' me at the ford. Now he says we got to stop, boys—ain't that a corker?"

"I'm backin' that order, Frang!" Halvern warned. Slowly levering the rifle he'd taken Ann Vare, he stepped down from the porch and strode, under the weight of an ominous silence, out into the ranchyard.

Being nobody's particular fool, he knew that it was death he was heading into, most likely. But he had a rigid determination that those proud, stubborn youngsters in the Wing C house should have a chance. He figured to make the tattered shreds of his authority stick, somehow—and he didn't give much consideration to the price of failure.

Rabon, probably, was at the back of the house by now. But Lee Trent had spotted the Mexican's play, and would take care of the matter. And anyway, Mattsar's bunch out here was the main problem.

It always had been Halvern's way to tackle a tough proposition at the business end.

Mattsar let loose a mocking yell. "Come on, road-agent! If you think you can bluff us out—"

Halvern knew mighty well that one shot would unleash gunsmoke hell. Bluff was his game—the closer he could get to the raiders, the more he could bank on his star awing them. Gaunt and grim he strode on through the rain-settled dust.

But excitement, probably, twitched a Mattsar man's trigger finger. A rifle crashed—the slug wailed savagely past Halvern.

And that shot was like a spark dropped into a barrel of powder. With a chorus of yells, the raiders cut loose.

Halvern dropped to one knee and deliberately turned his body so that, sidewise to his opponents, he offered as slim a target as he could. The raiders' first shots passed over his head.

He snugged a wryly bitter cheek against the rifle-stock, drew a quick bead, fired. But the raiders were secure behind the cover of the hummocks; and the shot was wasted.

Quickly, Halvern levered the 30-30. But not quickly enough. A slug struck him with an ugly, rending impact—grating his teeth he reeled back, put down a hand to steady himself.

A maddening red haze shimmered before his eyes when he forced himself back to his kneeling position. Puffs of dirt were being kicked up, all around him, by raider slugs. Pretty pronto, more of those blue whistlers would find their mark. But Halvern regarded that face with an odd unconcern.

Cold fury kept him going as he aimed, fired, levered and fired again. But his slugs were ricocheting uselessly from the hummocks and the red haze was getting thicker. He'd made his bluff, and had been called. Mattsar held the cards.

But suddenly a wild whoop, close by his side, pulled Halvern partly around. Young Lee Trent was there, his face demoniac as he grinned in spite of a bloody, bullet-gashed cheek.

"Yuh bow-laiged fool!" Halvern managed to say. "Get back to the house! The Mex is gonna blow it up if yuh don't stop—"

"He needs no stoppin'!" Trent retorted, levering his rifle. "Bat, I had yuh ticketed plumb wrong—I'm powerful sorry."

Halvern couldn't keep back a grin. It gave a man a feeling he was not likely soon to forget, to see admiration glow once again in young Lee's eyes. . . The sheriff realized, suddenly, that he was swaying, that he was too weak to lever his rifle.

Trent grabbed him, supported him. "Look! I seen Rabon!"

There was a sudden, ominous boom, echoed by screams of agony. In amazement Halvern saw the gaudy little Mexican controlling a spooked and rearing bronc while he crimped a dynamite cap, with his teeth, on a short length of fuse, then jammed the cap into a stick of powder, touched a match to the fuse, and hurled the powder into the massed raiders.

The first explosion had wrought such destruction and surprise in the Mattsar bunch that those who still lived had had no time to line rifles on the Mexican.

And as the second explosion hurled upward a cloud of dust, Rabon drew his gold-plated persuader and rode into the mess to finish his work.

A WHILE later, Rabon came waddling into the Wing C house, where Halvern was stretched on a cot while Ann Vare attended to his badly shot-up shoulder. Trent had fogged to Chinwhisker for the doctor.

The Mexican shuddered a little, then managed to grin. "Ees mos' terrible, w'at 'ave happen to them *hombre* out there. But nothing, to w'at they was aim to do to you."

Halvern stuck out his hand. "Thanks, fella," he said.

Rabon shook hands gravely, then shrugged and patted one of the pockets of his resplendent vest. "Ees nothing, *hombrecito.* I 'ave make the profit, an' besides I 'ave know one shereef w'at ees real *caballero.* I got nothing for holler about. Now, I mus' ride."

"You can't!" Ann Vare said. "Stay to supper, at least."

"The *Señorita* ees mos' gracious—but me, I am the bad *hombre,* no? I 'ave kill today, many men. Mattsar ees very dead, an w'at few of hees sidekick which could ride, 'ave fog

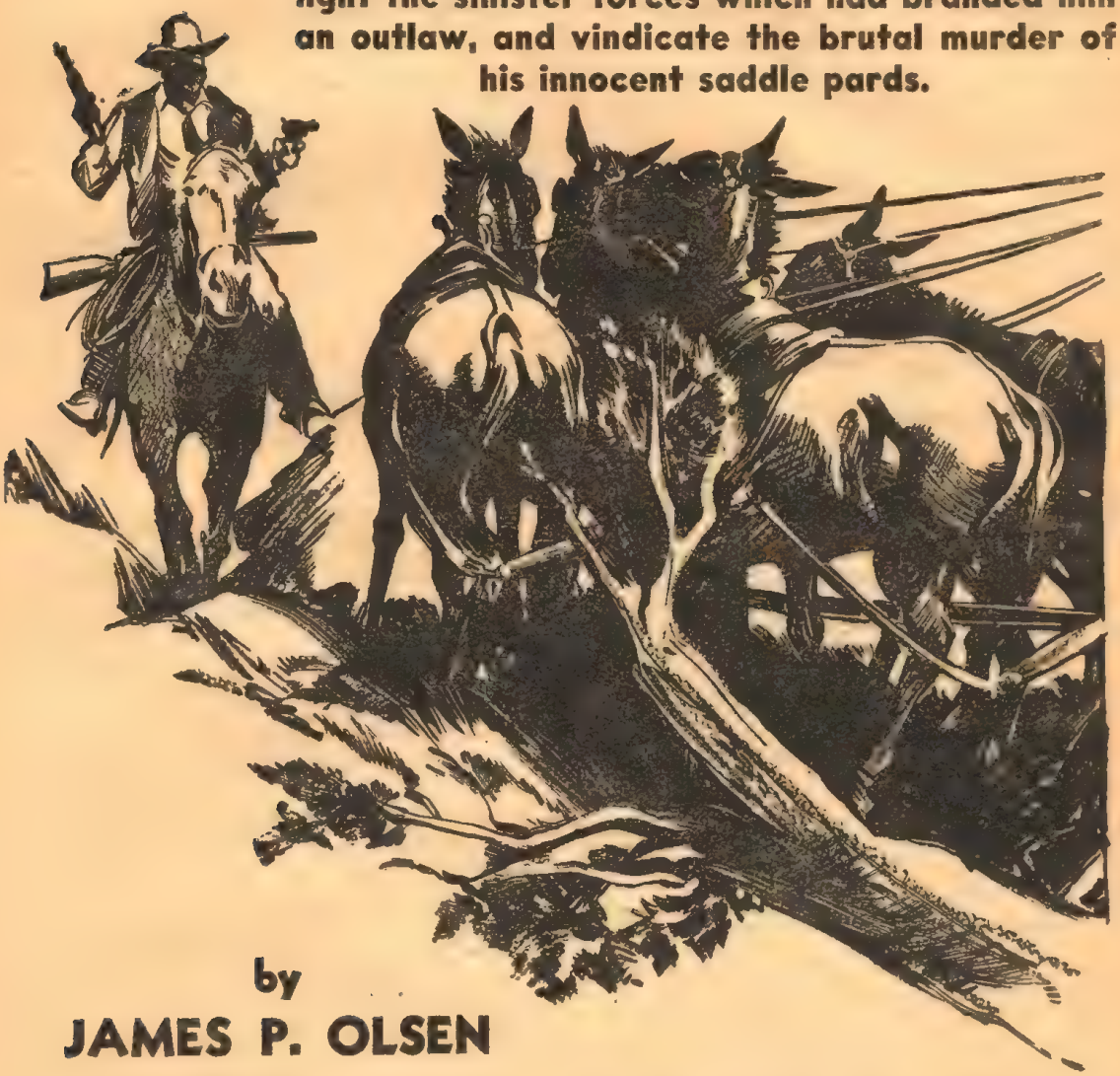
eet fas'. Now I got to get away, before the shereef fin', in the boxelder, the *Señor* Corpse w'at I 'ave 'ang las' night, *sabe?"* Rabon gave the sheriff a meaningful wink. "Like my cousin's wife's oncle, Diego, always sav before that time w'en the bull outguess him, the way of the *caballero* 'ave much interes'—but always, ees something weeth more interes' beyon' nex' hill, *verdad?"*

Halvern roused up. "It ain't for a grateful man to ask questions, but how come a *caballero* to cross up a man like you done Mattsar?"

Rabon frowned, but then let loose his dazzling smile. When he spoke, his voice had dropped to that bullfrog-in-a-barrel croak which seemed to bother him some. "I 'ave do no wrong, *hombrecito.* I not the Mattsar man—jus' the specialist w'at he 'ave hire. Eees mos' bad, but he make the bad mistake, w'en he give to me the shovel, tell me dig the hole under the *casa.* How can the *caballero,* who work always from the saddle, dig the hole een groun'? Ees jus' like hire the jeweler for put iron tire on wagon wheel, ha?"

GUNPOWDER SLEEP

Little did those three harmless pilgrims, bound for the hell-town of Horseshoe, know that sudden death was to be their only welcome. Then Fate took up the cards in that grim game and it was up to Reno Wade, playing a lone hand, to fight the sinister forces which had branded him an outlaw, and vindicate the brutal murder of his innocent saddle pards.



by

JAMES P. OLSEN

CHAPTER I
Double Death

RENO WADE, leaning against the bar, was ready for trouble. The cigarette stuck to his under lip was as cold as a gambler's heart; the glass of rye in his left hand remained untasted. And the yellowed bone grips on the butt of his heavy pistol seemed to yearn for the clutch of Reno's swift, trained fingers.

Across the way, Red Paris edged the straining group around the poker game, his arms folded negligently.

A Powerful Novel of Gunsmoke Vengeance

As the stage jerked to a sudden standstill, they could make out the dark figure of a masked man in the center of the trail . . .

Reno knew Red was ready to let loose with two deadly snub-nosed shoulder guns.

Smoke layered between them as their glances met—Reno's gray eyes chill, mocking, his lips curved in a fixed indifferent smile.

Gold pieces chinked dully and the soft pad-pad of cards on the green baize was loud against the wall of silence which the watchers had erected.

A gray-haired rider, his garb proclaiming him a man of many ranges, faced two housemen at that table. Gold was stacked before this rider, known as Bill Ivy. He picked up his drawn cards, scanned his hand, laid it down. His expression was set as he pushed double eagles into the pot.

The bet was called.

There was a hissing over the room as men expelled spent breaths. One gambler cursed and flung away from the table. The other glared murderously, and many pairs of greedy eyes were on Bill Ivy as he put his small fortune into the pockets of his chaps and buttoned the flaps.

Many eyes followed him as he, Red Paris and Reno Wade came together at the bar. These three were sufficient

unto themselves, and Bill Ivy invited nobody else to drink.

The silence ran on. Nobody cared to tackle this trio. They seemed neither short-horned nor milk-fed. Nor were they. These past two years, since they'd met during a water-hole rumpus in Eastern Oregon, these three had been inseparable. A combination out for fight, fun and frolic, and garnering *muschisimo* of the same.

Bill Ivy ordered more drinks. They'd hit Kilgare, Arizona, early this morning, and it was near noon now. They were satisfied and ready to roll their tails, but damned if they'd let these Gila country buzzards hurry them!

They pushed through the swinging doors and sought their mounts. Ivy's fuzztail packed a kak saddle, no trimmings at all. Red Paris favored the heavy Southwest, double-rigged hull with sweeping tapaderos, martingale and silver work.

The youngest of this drifting range-running bunch, Reno Wade, had picked what he liked from everywhere and chucked it all in one. He used a maguey twine, took his dallies, yet sat a center-fire saddle with the wild rose stamp favored by the northern man. Difference in ages made no difference here. All were wild, salty, capable, and hadn't yet satisfied their taste for life.

THEY headed north from Kilgare, across a rising, barren country that pleased them not at all. Toward mid-afternoon, when they'd had a resting spell, a drink, a smoke, and Reno and Red had damned Bill Ivy for a man of wealth, they travelled on. The trail ran up into scattered, resinous bull pines, flattened out and ran through a country of small hills and trees and brush.

Reno looked at Ivy, yawned, dragged his carbine from the boot and patted it.

"Right about here somewheres is the place," Reno said.

"Red, you awake, huh?" Ivy grunted.

Red had draped his reins around the horn and his arms were again folded. "Yahmmm," he also yawned. "But why should I waste good shells protectin' *your* money? Oh, yeah. I seen them fresh tracks running far apart, meanin' speed, all along. An' I saw that saloon owner in Kilgare nod, an' four fellers went out the back way. I—"

"Yes!" Reno exclaimed and went off his horse.

From a brushy little mound ahead, sunlight glinted on metal. A shot rang over the heated silence, and more gun-thunder rolled to disturb the placid afternoon.

Bill Ivy's old Peacemaker answered that challenge and Red's snub-nosed matched pistols raged and snarled. The sharper, higher crack of the carbine punctuated this sentence with hot lead as Reno lay on his belly and sprayed the bush.

"Damn!" bawled someone. "There was a scrambling ahead and the three saddlemates heard the drum of horses being frantically ridden away from the other side of the little rise.

"I counted three," Reno called over to Ivy. He raised and fell back. No shots came his way.

The three arose, looked quizzically at each other, shook their heads. They went to their horses who hadn't budged while the cannonade had taken place, picked up the reins.

Walking, they reached the other side of the brushy rise. One of the four men they'd noted leaving the Kilgare saloon, lay crumpled there.

They mounted and rode on.

"You see," Ivy said soberly, after a while, "what a wild life, and hunting money will do for you?"

"Wild livin' ain't got us down," Red boasted.

"No, but you never know. Some-

times," he went on seriously, "I wish I'd married and settled down. Killin's no good. That feller back there—might've had a maw, a sister . . ."

THE range became more flat, and most of the timber was behind them when they broke camp next morning. As they put out the remnants of the fire, the last thing they always did when breaking camp, Bill Ivy cussed the weight of his gold.

"These old bullhides done toted a lot, but they're figgering to fall plumb off me. Reckon, when we get to the next town, I'll bank some, get folding money for some, and sort of blow the rest."

"For beer," Reno said an hour later as a wide bend in the widening road showed ahead. "That's Horseshoe ahead. They say it's a nice range beyond, but sort of dry. So blow us to some beer."

"You said that a hour ago, Bill," Red mourned. "He just now answers. Reno, you talk too much."

But Reno was paying him no nevermind. Cussing, he pulled up and swung his stocky frame to the ground.

"Shoe loose," he said disgustedly, putting down his bay's off forefoot. He started unbuckling his alforjas. "I'll nail 'er back. Take a few minutes—"

Red winked at Bill Ivy. "Well, me'n Bill will go on in an' wait for you at a saloon. You stay here in this nice hot sun! We'll drink some cold beer while we sorta commiserate some an' plenty for you."

"Horseshoes never brought Reno no luck, comin' into Horseshoe," Ivy hoorawed. "We'll order one for you, Reno. No rush, though. Reckon I'll unload this gold before she drags me down, or some misguided fools makes a sashay at it."

"An' I always figgered horseshoes was luck," Reno griped. He set to work on the shoe as Red and Ivy rode on toward town.

Right then Reno Wade didn't know just how lucky for him a loose horseshoe really was.

Bill Ivy and Red Paris kicked up hot dust for a couple more miles, passed piles of cans and trash, squalid shacks and then were in Horseshoe proper. The town was laid out on a curve of the road, which was probably the reason for its name.

"Never had enough money at once I had cause to go into a bank," Red revealed as he and Ivy left their horses in the side-street shade of the thick, adobe bank building on a corner. "I reckon I'll traipse inside with you."

They went to the front. The sign on the window said it was the Cattleland Bank. But Red reckoned the bald-headed, squinty, squeaky voiced hombre who poked a thin nose up behind the wicket never had viewed a cow.

"I'm Moses Grove," the man piped. "I'm cashier, and teller, and bookkeeper. What's it for you?"

"Less of the same," Ivy grunted. "I'm a stranger. I want—"

"You wait," Grove said and hurried to a room in the rear. A long wait, then, as the rumble of men's voices seeped from that room, Moses Grove reappeared. Three men came legging it out the rear side door of the bank. One, flat-faced, unshaven, went on around to the back. The other two, one of them a tall, arrogant, dark commanding figure, hurried toward the shabby, two-storied hotel on the corner opposite the bank.

It seemed to take Moses Grove a long time to make out a cashier's check, and change bills for gold coin. The man's bald head was beaded with perspiration and his hand trembled as if he were stricken with a chill.

As Ivy and Red came out into the street, Red licked his lips. "Now for that *cerveza*," he said with enthusiasm.

The pound of a horse's hoofs start-

ing into a sudden run ran through Horseshoe's quietude. And then the voice of Moses Grove squealed high to awaken and alarm everyone.

"Help, help!" he yelled from the doorway of the bank. "The bank's been robbed!"

One of the too men who had hurried over to the hotel, leaped out onto the porch, his six-gun flaming hell. Men popped up all along the street, shouting and running aimlessly about.

A rifle suddenly added its sharper song to the flaming six-gun's roar. The sound of the rifle came from an unseen point, and the man behind the trigger remained hidden.

But that rifle lullabied two men to a gunpowder sleep. Slugs smashed into Red Paris and Bill Ivy, and they rocked, spun, went down in lifeless heaps. The seal of death held on their faces set expressions of pain and surprise as their blood made mudballs in the heated dust.

Horseshoe clamored to a frenzied awakening and action. And but for a loose shoe on his horse, Reno Wade would have been sprawled beside the bodies of his pards . . . who now were on the way to meet their Maker.

CHAPTER II
An Empty Cartridge

RENO had heard the sound of shots before he rounded the bend and sighted the town. Now, as he came on, he saw the dust rising thickly from the street as a crowd of running men gathered there. Reno felt no premonitions of anything wrong as far as he was concerned. Red and Ivy, he figured, could take care of themselves.

A girl hurried along the board sidewalk toward the bank, and there was something about her manner which suggested more than mere curiosity. Reno looked at her a second time—a long searching look.

Her stride was easy, and her short riding skirt moulded against shapely legs. Small high-heeled riding boots adorned her feet. A dark gray Stetson was crammed down on her head, and a tangle of mutinous, dark hair showed beneath the brim.

Regardless of the concern mirrored on her face, Reno could see that she was beautiful; he was impressed by the firmness of her little chin, her large dark eyes and saucy nose.

A vagrant, sudden gust of wind caught the girl's hat and lifted it, rolling it into the street. The bay shied and Reno jerked him warningly. There was a little of the showoff in his lithe, sweeping action now. He swung down, caught up the hat and sat up straight in the saddle again, guiding the bay toward the walk.

"Miss," he suddenly hoped she was a Miss, "I think the wind done me a fine turn. It done blowed your hat toward me."

As he handed it down to her, their eyes met and for a moment they looked steadily at one another. His gaze was frank, honestly appraising, and there was no mistaking his admiration.

The girl's smile showed a big dimple in one cheek, and Reno experienced a strange sensation in the region of his heart.

"Perhaps, if you're around, I'll thank you better later," the girl told him as she nodded and went up the street.

Reno Wade scratched his head and grinned. "I'll be here," he allowed, as he got the bay in motion, "if I have to hogtie Red an' Bill an' stake them out on grass."

He drew up at the edge of the milling, gabbling crowd, seeking some sign of Red and Ivy. Talk buzzed in his ears. Words that told him about what had happened. A bank robbery, and one of the gents had gotten away.

He saw the mounts of his saddle

pals down there beside the bank, and moved his horse in closer. He could look down into the cleared space in the center of the throng. Ignorant, dumb Deed Rice, deputy sheriff, was there. And Moses Grove. Grove was jabbering, "Come in and changed some money. Three of them. Then they pulled guns. Cleaned out all the money in sight. Fifteen thousand dollars. The one that got away, riding around behind the bank, had the sack with the money."

The world seemed to heave in circles about Reno Wade. All the breath left his body and he set his teeth and gripped the saddlehorn, swaying back and forth. God, this couldn't be! For he'd seen those two crumpled figures lying in the street.

"That's right, Rice," Big Jard Freen, a tall dark, arrogant figure, added. "I saw them. Mark Nero, my hand, jumped out on the porch of the hotel. I was—uh, just down the street. Nero started shooting. Guess some others did. I saw one man rampagin' around the bank."

Mark Nero, flat-faced and unshaven, toting two guns low and tied, nodded confirmation.

Reno Wade rose in his stirrups. His hand quivered over the butt of his gun. He was ready to throw these lies into their teeth and back it up with lead. Why had his pals been shot down as bank robbers. Why—

That "why" stayed Reno's hand and closed his mouth. There was something funny here. He aimed to find out what, and when he did, hell's fires were going to singe somebody's soul. He'd have more chance of learning things if it wasn't known he knew those two dead men in the street.

He found it hard to contain himself, but, with a great effort, he managed it, and he finally heard Deed Rice bawling for someone to gather a posse. Just as Reno started to move away, he realized that the deputy was yelling at him.

"You, there, feller." Rice was strutting, grabbing what brief glory he might from this moment in the spotlight. "You're a stranger here. Explain yourself."

"That's right, make him explain," Big Jard Freen chimed in.

RENO'S eyes narrowed. Freen's voice rubbed him the wrong way, and he didn't like the cut of the man's fine clothes, his trim, black mustache, his little eyes. Didn't like the way Freen packed a silver-inlaid cutter. Liked no part of him!

"Who in hell are you to put in your jaw?" Reno snarled. "I'll answer this Law's questions. You keep out of it."

"You be damn careful how you talk to your betters, saddle tramp," snarled Freen.

"When you prove you are," Reno said curtly. He looked down at Rice. "I come in from direction of Kilgare," he explained. "I just got here. I ain't packin' no money because I ain't got much, an' that's my own."

"You could've rode out, cached the loot and come back," reasoned Rice.

"You can see my horse ain't been rode hard." Damn, but it was a fight to act natural, with Red and Ivy lying there and his own grief, loneliness and sorrow running riot within him.

"You could've changed. But I allow that's some far-fetched," the deputy sheriff acquiesced.

"It is. I saw this gentleman when he rode in. He saved my hat when it blew off."

Reno jerked around and looked down. There the girl stood. She smiled up at him and he forced himself to smile in return. Rice bowed. "Yes'm, Miss Tulane." It was easy to see she was of some importance here.

Freen put in his lip again. His face was darker with another sort of anger now. "See here, Jean," he barked. "You ought not stand up for a stranger."

"See here, Jard Freen," said the girl evenly. "What I do is no say-so of yours."

"No?" Freen's color suddenly ran high. He almost choked as his breath hissed out and he turned and walked swiftly away.

Reno had no time to thank the girl. She was working around the rapidly dispersing crowd, toward a tall gray-haired man who wore an expression of deep concern. He guessed rightly that this man was her father. They looked amazingly alike.

Men were now carrying Red and Ivy toward the undertaker's, and Deed Rice was herding a motley bunch toward their horses. The posse that was to hunt the "third" of the trio of bank robbers, was being formed.

It occurred to Reno that it would go all-fired hard with him if it were learned that he was a partner of those dead men. He couldn't *prove* he'd been riding the road to Horseshoe when the robbery occurred. Robbery? It didn't ring true somehow . . . There was only one thing to do—get to the bottom of whatever sandy was there —fast . . .

Reno remained motionless in his saddle, remembering the positions of the bodies, mentally checking what he heard. He looked toward the hotel, at the upstairs windows above the roof of the front porch. Then he looked at the bank. He aimed to keep an eye on that bank, and figured that one of those front rooms up there would just be the place.

He felt an aching loneliness now that his pals were gone. Gone! The word persisted in hammering at his brain. Branded as bank robbers, shot down in cold blood. What lay behind it all? Could he find a clue to what was happening before he, himself, was identified with those dead men and slammed in jail?

He stabled his horse at the livery and feed corral, took his scant belongings and walked back to the hotel. The hostler, as well as men on the street, watched him with suspicion. All about him, Reno felt an oppressive gloom.

The owner of the hotel had no friendliness to offer when Reno stepped up to the dingy desk.

He shook his head. "Ain't got no front room. Only two in front, an' one's always paid up by a cow-buyer who comes in regular. It's locked up now, as usual, when he is gone. Tom Tulane, who owns the T spread, north of town, rented the other's last night when he come in."

"I won't be staying tonight. He can have the room."

Reno turned toward the tall, worried gray-haired man he'd decided was the father of the girl.

"I'm staying up tonight," the man said bitterly. "We've got to make a close check at the bank."

Alone in that upstairs room, Reno tossed his doofunnies on the bed and sat down in a rickety chair across from it. He stared aimlessly at the floor. For a long time, he was not conscious that he was looking at something glittering just under the bed. Suddenly he shook himself, frowned, went over and kneeled down.

When he arose, he had a fired, brass cartridge case lying in his palm. As he sniffed at it, his expression became one of cold, chilling menace.

That .30-30 rifle shell hadn't been fired more than a little while before, or Reno didn't know his gunpowder. And now, as he purposefully sniffed the air, he was sure that there was an odor of burnt powder in the room!

CHAPTER III
Accusations

RENO went over to the window, examined it carefully. The dust had been recently disturbed and the

window arised easily when he tried it. He stood looking down into the street, where the bodies of his friends had fallen and he watched Tom Tulane walk slowly into the bank.

He pocketed the spent cartridge, hitched at his filled cartridge belt and left the room. There was a little knot of men in front of the undertaker's, and the undertaker himself held forth in the doorway. Reno caught his words as he casually approached.

"Yes sir," the undertaker was saying, "they was three .30-30 slugs in the red-headed robber. Two had hit the other, but one went on through. Both of them was plumb tore up. Was a six-gun slug in each of them, too— but *they* wouldn't been fatal. Reckon Mark Nero, that quick-gun rider for Big Jard Freen's Circle JF done that, when he fired from the hotel porch."

"Reckon nobody knows who 'twas shot them. Ever'body was grabbin' for hawlegs an' millin' around plumb bodacious," one man said.

"Well, no never-mind. Just means the town has to plant a couple unknowed, dead robbers in pine boxes up on the rise."

Reno turned and went slowly back up the street. His pals had been burned with .30-30 slugs, and he was certain he had one of the cartridge cases in his pocket right now. Somebody had been in that room, looking down toward the bank, ready to blast Red and Ivy down. Ready to make sure they were dead.

He saw the girl coming slowly toward him and something got all tight and cold inside of him. Her father had had that room, and he was connected with the bank. Reno didn't want it that way, he suddenly realized, and he found himself hoping against hope, that this connection had no significance.

He stopped, hat in hand, smiled as she came on.

"Ma'am," he said when she stopped, "I want to thank you for explainin' me awhile ago. It didn't seem to sit well with that Freen *hombre*."

"It was nothing," she told him. "Jard Freen is all right, I guess. He and I just have ideas that don't agree."

"You're Miss Tulane?" he inquired.

"Yes. Your daddy seemed right worried, ma'am. Oh, excuse me if I'm holdin' you."

"Not at all." She seemed a bit puzzled because the presence of this stranger seemed oddly quieting. She'd come to like him instantly, but she was unable to explain why.

"I'm just walking about," she said as he fell into step beside her, "to keep my nerves from riding me. You see father is president and one of the principal stockholders of the Cattleland Bank. If the money isn't recovered, and I doubt it ever will be, there'll be more than one little outfit go broke. Loans will have to be called in. Folks here in town will suffer, too. The bank may have to close. And you can't imagine how that would make father feel!"

Reno nodded. Yeah, he bet so! Likely this Tulane had a hand in whatever had happened, and would profit if the bank closed. But, as he looked sidewise at Jean Tulane, he wanted desperately to find things otherwise. Again he could hear Bill Ivy saying that killing and wildness were no good; that a man should marry and settle down. He could hear Red declaring wild living hadn't gotten them down . . .

Suddenly, he yearned to take her in his arms, but he didn't.

HE changed the subject. He didn't want to learn anything from the girl that would send him dragging iron against her father.

They turned and walked back the way they'd come, Reno wondering if the gunman in that room had realized he'd not picked up all of the spent shells he'd levered from the rifle. The girl was wondering about him, and he knew it, yet he offered no information about himself.

Big Jard Freen was going into the hotel. He paused, glared murderously at Reno, then stamped on inside, his fancy spurs chirring the tone of his temper.

"He live there?" Reno wondered aloud.

"Part of the time. He doesn't stay on his ranch much."

He left her there and went inside with a "Hope I can see you again an' get to know you well."

"I hope so, too," she said before she realized and the ardor of her words caused her to blush and go hurriedly away.

The hotel owner eyed Reno blankly as he leaned against the desk and rolled a smoke. Innocently, he hoped, the cowboy said, "I wonder where Mister Tulane was when the robbery took place?"

"I wouldn't know," answered the hotel owner gruffly.

"Reckon this Jard Freen was around, an' this gunnie that works for him—Mark Nero. What's he like?"

"I reckon where Freen was is his own business. And if you want to see what Nero is like, you ask him. He's standing over there in front of the saloon."

Reno looked. He saw the flat-faced Nero, gun tied down, and pegged him for what he was. Reno had seen a lot of that conscienceless killer type.

"Seems to me," sneered the hotel owner, "you're powerful interested. And you've been figured as maybe the third one of them robbers. Or did you forget?"

"Just what in the hell are you drivin' at?" demanded Reno as he leaned toward the hotelman. Seeing the quivering wrinkles around Reno's eyes, noting the flare of his nostrils and the set of his jaw, the other drew back hurriedly. "Nothing a-tall," he gulped.

"That's healthy," Reno said coldly as he turned on his heel and stalked out. He angled across the street to the middle of the block and pushed through swinging doors of a saloon. Instantly all conversation stopped and Reno felt many pairs of eyes affixed upon him. Then, with studied indifference the men returned to their drinks. But Reno had the feeling that he was being closely watched, and the attitude of this town toward him had suddenly become one of intense suspicion.

He had a drink and filled his glass again, brooding over the times he and Red and Ivy had stood together having their likker and telling the rest of the world off to hell. He sipped his drink in a silent toast to his dead partners.

THE swinging doors opened abruptly to the smack of heavy palms. Mark Nero, flat, broken nose jerking with a sneer, surveyed the room. He moved along close to Reno, caught the bottle and glass slid along the bar to him and poured his drink. He downed it, smacked his lips, let his hand brush his gun. He turned square to Reno then, and his voice was a snarl as he said, "I hear you been askin' about things that's no butt-in of your'n."

Hotel owner to Freen, Freen to Nero. And Nero to—whom? Reno measured the gunman, noted his bulk, his hard expression.

"An' you heard I was askin' what?" he grunted.

"About where some folks was when a shootin' was takin' on. You, now, maybe ain't one of them would-be an' was bank robbers, an' aimin' to get level for them? If you are, lash loose with 'er. An' if so or ain't, you'll fare better—"

Slugs from this slat-faced ape rested in the bodies of Red and Ivy. This hyena was accusing him, and telling him how he'd fare. The pent up loneliness, the sorrow at losing his pals, the grim determination that was a fire inside Reno Wade, suddenly flamed loose.

"Don't tell me!" he snarled. His left hand gripped the edge of the bar and he used that leverage to put more power behind the right fist he slammed against Mark Nero's rock-like jaw.

Nero swayed and a dull film swept across his eyes. A sudden hush descended over the saloon. Reno let go of the bar. His rage was blinding him. He wanted to chop this gunman down, make him suffer, make him crawl before these others, and he set out to do that very thing.

His left came arching over and made a sickening sound as it caught Nero flat, bumpy nose. The big gunnie rocked, put up his hands and bawled a curse. Reno dropped punches to Nero's stomach, and when Nero dropped his hands, his right hand closing blindly around the butt of his gun, Reno Wade pulverized his lips and drove them through his teeth.

He slammed his left fist to the muscle of Nero's gun arm, and a pistol spun from the limp fingers. Nero bent over and his face was a beefy wreck that sprayed sudden crimson. Reno danced around him, and a few of the very initiate narrowed their eyes shrewdly. They noted the pantherish movements of this rather stocky man. High-heeled puncher's boots failed to slow his footwork, and his speed and his timing was something to marvel at.

Blood was flowing from Nero's battered ears, his mouth, his nose, and cuts above his eyes. Reno's fists flailed on, and the gunman's ribs boomed like jungle drums. He tottered, out on his feet, then crashed slowly to the floor.

Breathing heavily but unharmed, Reno awed the onlookers with his show of atavistic savagery. He leaned above the still form of Mark Nero, his face white, and a bluish sort of tinge around his lips.

He straightened slowly, fighting to control himself. Some of those oddly frightened eyes that stared at him now shifted to look past him. Without reasoning, Reno whirled. It seemed he left the floor, and when he came down he was facing toward the door. Though none could swear they'd seen him draw, his gun was in his hand, his finger on the trigger, pulling it, his thumb holding the hammer from falling.

Teeth bared, the gent just inside the doors had two guns with their muzzles just clearing his holsters. He'd taken his own sweet time, and it looked like he wouldn't live long to regret that oversight.

CHAPTER IV
Reno Goes Into Action

HEAD thrust forward, his gun-barrel a tunnel to hell for the man who stood in the doorway, Reno clamped his thumb down and held his slug. One of the newcomer's two guns made a sharp sound as it flung out of his opening hand and hit the floor. The other slid back into the leather.

Fear, seasoned with rage and spiced with hatred, showed in his actions and on his face. A thin, mean red face under hair so tow it was almost white. Brows of the same color and small, mean eyes with a pinkish cast, made him an unusual albino indeed.

"You're drawin' cards, ain't you?"

Reno said flatly. "Well, before you take a hand, you'd better tell me why you want to sit in. Come on, damn you. Talk up."

"I'm passin'," the other answered. "For now. Just now, is all. You musta got Nero foul."

"Passin'," Nero sniffed. "An' I reckon *that*, there in the sawdust an' tobacco spit an' dirt where he belongs, is a friend of yours. Who in hell are you?"

"Purdy Gowan," said the other sullenly.

"Reckon you work for Freen, eh? He seems to have collected a right nice mess of skunk around him. Wouldn't doubt he's a lot of the breed hisself."

There was a sibilant intaking of breath on every side. Men who wanted to stay healthy didn't speak thus of Big Jard Freen. Freen was a power, devastating with his fists and fast with his gun. And as for having Nero and Gowan aching for a ride at you—well, there was nobody in here who even liked to think of it.

"You talk big," mumbled Gowan, his eyes on the floor.

"Just put me in action," said Reno bitterly. "I'll show you how the cat hopped when he said hello to hell. Any time you figger on pickin' sticky things, I'm the huckleberry that'll be right there. Now, get to hell out of my way. This damn place stinks!"

Reno calmed down when he got outside. It was sunset now. Sunset, and Red and Ivy lay down the street, cold, dead. Reno walked to the edge of town, smoking and thinking. As he turned back, a tottering old man paused and peered at Reno in the gathering dusk.

"I reckon," he piped up, "you really ain't the feller that run behind the bank an' got off with the loot. *You* don't look so *loco* that you'd pass a chance of wringin' the neck of Moses Grove, that squeakin', hoppin', handwashin' flunky there. "Guess Tom Tulane's canned Grove long ago, only Jard Freen has some say in the bank and wants him on. Oh, well—" and muttering to himself, he went on toward his shack.

So Freen was in the bank, too! Were Freen and Tulane in some sort of shady deal? Tulane, the room, the rifle cartridge case. Freen's sending a gunnie after him. And why hadn't Reno seen this Purdy Gowan around in Horseshoe earlier in the day?

Reno couldn't help wondering, too, at the way things evidently stood between Jean Tulane and Freen—Freen trying to boss her, evidently hating anybody who looked at her, and Jean telling him off right quick.

And why did Tulane seem so worried? Was the robbery the only reason? Then, too, why had Freen seemed so willing that Deed Rice, the dumb deputy, cinch something onto Reno Wade?

Reno tossed his cigarette away and his stride was indicative of anger. He was getting warm, close to something, but just what it was, he couldn't tell.

He wasn't hungry, but he figured he'd better eat. No telling what might happen to postpone other meals. He washed up and went into the hotel dining room.

Jean Tulane and her father were at the first of the two family style tables, the only diners in the room so far. Reno nodded, asked "D'you mind," as a formality, and took the chair beside Tom Tulane, facing the girl.

"I heard you had a little trouble at the saloon this evening," remarked Tulane.

"Some," Reno admitted casually.

"They're two hard men—and Freen is no man to fool with," Tulane advised. "Not that you don't seem capable," he added.

"I don't like to be figgered a bank robber," Reno said. "You bein' president of that bank—do you figger I might've been the one that got away?"

"I never set an opinion," Tom Tulane evaded. "You're a total stranger, you know. Hunting a job?"

"Maybe I've got one," Reno said enigmatically.

Tulane frowned, shrugged, took a bite of food.

"I don't think you are," Jean said impulsively, looking Reno square in the eyes.

"Then," vowed Reno, "I don't give one li'l doggone what the rest of them think of me."

"You saw the shootin'? Or was you in your room?" he inquired of Tom Tulane.

"No. Didn't see it. I'm glad, too. Those men didn't seem the bank robbing type. It's a shame. But men fool you, sometimes. No. I was down at the store, figuring with old Sandusky on a loan he needed to build onto his place. God, this is going to hurt this country if that money isn't found."

"I bet. You know, Mister Tulane—Oh, never mind. I was goin' to ask a question. No never mind a-tall."

HE'D been about to ask about something that had just occurred to him. How in the hell had Moses Grove known, right off-hand there in the street, the amount of money that had been taken from the bank?

The more he thought of this, the phonier it became!

Tulane mumbled something about returning to the bank, got up and left. Reno looked up to find Jean studying him frankly.

"You know," she said slowly, "there's something odd about all this. And I have a funny, oh, I can't explain it, feeling that you're deeply interested in this somehow. If you're not—"

"Why ain't I got a job, or huntin' one?" put in Reno. "Well, maybe I will get a job. You see, I was just driftin' until I hit Horseshoe. Horseshoes, they seem to be runnin' along with me today. But now," there was a definite meaning in his tone, "I figger that stayin' here was meant as what I ought to do. You think that would be a good idea?"

"One never knows," she murmured, eyes veiled by her long, lowered lashes. "You—you might stay awhile, and see."

When she had gone, Reno sat there, not eating, for a long, long time. He got up, then, and started out. In the hall outside the dining room, he came face-to-face with Big Jard Freen. The man stood a half-head above him and blocked his way.

"I hear you branded me as a skunk," he snarled.

"This hall's narrow, an' I never liked skunk smell," Reno said curtly. "You savvy? An' what do you make of that?"

"I could shoot you, or break your back right now. That's what I could make of it," snarled Freen, fighting for self-control. "But I'll make it this —You better get out of Horseshoe, and stay out . . ."

"So it'd be believed I was a bank robber? You crave that idea around, huh? Then crave, huddem you. I got other ideas."

He went past Freen and on outside. There he left the sidewalk, kept to the street. The town was deserted at this, the supper, hour. The mournful barking of a dog crept through the evening stillness and somewhere a baby cried.

He reached a building where a faded sign proclaimed "Sandusky's Store," and went into the dim, yellow glow of the lamplit interior.

The old man who sat in a backless chair behind the counter arose and confronted him. It was Sandusky, and the old man who'd spoken to Reno earlier.

"Got my vittles in a hurry tonight," he confided. "Maybe won't be eatin' much, the bank goes bust or calls in

loans. This ain't been such a hefty two years just past. Bad range conditions an' market. An' when she seemed to be gettin' better—Oh, well. Them as had to give up, did get a smidgin' out of Jard Freen. This keeps up, he'll own all the country abouts, except Tulane's 2-T."

Here was a heaven-sent opening. Reno perched on the counter, seeming intent on building his cigarette. "So the bank holds your notes, huh?" he began casually.

"Yup."

Reno's heart was hammering, and he prayed that the answer to his next question would be right. If it wasn't, his new-found dream of remaining in Horseshoe and settling down would be a bitter mockery.

"I heard somebody say, forget just who, that Tulane was in your store when the killin' took place today.

"Hmmn. By daddy, that's right. He was. Figgeratin' with me on a li'l more lend to help me build up my place."

A great weight eased from Reno. So much for that. But, though he couldn't have been the rifleman in that upstairs room, and Reno was sure the man who pumped slugs into Red and Ivy *had* been up there, Tom Tulane was not yet in the clear.

He stiffened as old Sandusky stood up. Outside, the posse was returning. Reno heard a man call out, "Nary a sign. Not even tracks. She's my notion that other'n hardly left this town, if he did a-tall!" Reno wondered what the next play was to be . . .

CHAPTER V
Siesta In Horseshoe

NEXT morning, after a night of fitful dozing, his gun on the bed close to his hand, Reno came down to peck at a breakfast which he didn't want. The few men in the dining room had no words for him, and their glances were more than merely suspicious, they were downright hostile.

Reno went out and sat down on the porch, facing the undertaker's down the street. He hoped they wouldn't put Red and Ivy away today. He couldn't come out and claim them for decent burial yet. And he figured that money sent anonymously would just be pocketed and they'd get pine boxes anyhow.

After awhile he drifted down to Sandusky's. The old man was getting ready, he said, to close up store for awhile. He was going to a meeting at the bank. Stockholders and directors were going to meet there with those who owed money.

"Pike Loftis, of Rafter L, an' Cardiff Bane runnin' Block B, they're in this mornin'," Sandusky revealed. "All plenty worrit, too. They stand to lose ever'thing. They was some jabber amongst them an' Deed Rice an' others. They figger to keep a close watch on you, an' see you don't leave town."

"They ain't havin' to watch me for that," growled Reno.

"No, reckon not. You seem plumb set. I useta be like that. Only I've lived a long time. A damn sight longer than *you* will, with Freen an' his gunnies runnin' a prod for you."

The old man hippety-humped up the street and Reno sat on the steps before the store, his hat pulled low to shade his eyes from the sun that, even at this early hour, was already cloaking Horseshoe in a pitiless heat.

A few spring wagons, buckboards and buggies had been pulled up at hitchrails along the street; cow ponies stood hipshot, switching flies at those rails. Up near the bank, punchers hunkered and smoked and whittled, conversing in low, worried tones, or remaining silent and watching the bank door with anxious eyes. Inside, their bosses were at a meeting which might mean their jobs.

A slow hour dragged by and there

was no movement on the street. Then there was a stir at the bank, and the cowmen came out, and spoke to their riders. There was a sudden rush for the saloon, and Reno saw that whereas some of the ranchers seemed at ease, there was a certain furtive look in their eyes.

Old Sandusky returned, eager to tell his great news. He beckoned Reno inside, and fishing under a counter, unearthed an ancient jug.

"Don't know why I taken a shine to you, young feller," he drawled, uncorking the jug. "Me, I take no truck in them sayin' you could be the robber. An' Freen's bein' against you makes me for you."

He tilted the jug in the crook of his arm and let good corn whiskey trickle down his throat. Reno followed suit.

"That's a toast that means to hell with Freen!" Sandusky said emphatically. "The hawgin', peckin'-in son. Wade, you know what was done up there? Well, now, bend a ear to this:

"Tulane, bein' president an' ownin' most stock, it was up to him, mostly. Freen, though, owns a passel, too. Tulane said he couldn't bear to see his ol' friends go bust on account the bank. He said he felt responsible, an' aimed to make things up. Know what he did? He mortgaged his place to Freen, on a short note, for that fifteen thousand. The 2-T's worth how much more I can't begin' to figger. But, things bein' as they is, she's hell to raise near that much cash."

"That gives Freen a hold on Tulane," said Reno darkly.

"Sure does. An' more, it's goin' to sorta force Miss Jean to limber up to Freen. He's been after her for I don't know how long. Y'see, Wade, Tulane's range, out north here, controls Half Mound Springs. Freen's edged in all around, buyin' up busted outfits an' homesteaders. He uses water by Tulane's say. But if Tom Tulane ever saw fit, he could make all the stuff Freen's hawgged up as worthless as a nightshirt to a gila monster."

"Uh-huh. An' where's Freen get his *dinero?*" Reno wanted to know.

"Oh, he's always workin' deals, sellin' land to pilgrims, then gettin' it back, along with their money. He's got a few notes over at the bank, business-like, an' in general, manages. Plays a fair hand of poker, too, he does—though I hate to admit he's good at anything! Now, he's got Tulane in a split stick, an' I bet he makes Jean miserable. Seems like that damn bank robbery was just made to fit Jard Freen's packsaddle, by daddy!"

THE pattern was becoming clear! The fact that he *knew,* where none of the others did, that Red and Ivy weren't bank robbers, put things in a different light for Reno. Then, there was still that shell . . .

"One good thing, though," Sandusky went on, "Moses Grove, he quit his job. Said he was goin' East, that this robbery'd done upset his nerves. Allow he'll be pullin' out on the stage tonight."

Reno nodded absently. He was trying to figure how to bring this thing to a head—he had to have proof. For one thing, he was damned certain Tom Tulane had no hand in anything downside. And he also was certain that Big Jard Freen wasn't going to deal Jean Tulane too much misery.

As he strolled out of the store, he met Deed Rice plodding slowly toward him. The deputy stopped and eyed him querulously. "I done dug in your stuff in your room," he complained. "Nothing there. I wish I could figure you. Where you from, and what you doing here?"

Reno displayed no suggestion of anger because of this information, and shrugged as he studied Rice.

"Fella, if you could find that bank loot, you'd go after the man, no matter what?"

"You damn right! Why? You going to confess?" Deed was eager.

"I got nothin' to confess. But I got a question to ask you. Maybe I'll be lookin' you up before very long," and he passed on, leaving Deed to stand there mumbling to himself.

Reno resumed his chair on the hotel porch. Mark Nero came down the other side of the street, glanced across at him, hesitated then went on. After awhile, Purdy Gowan came along and entered the saloon.

It was about noon when Freen came from the bank with Jean Tulane and her father. They walked up the hotel steps, Tulane nodding wearily at Reno, the girl giving him a quick, faint smile. Freen stopped.

"You," he grunted. "I can't see any use of your staying in Horseshoe. Maybe you're waiting to attend the funeral of those other bank robbers."

"I never was mixed with no bank robbers," said Reno evenly. "An' as for Horseshoe, I like 'er around here an' I aim to stay. Even," he added, "if there is a plumb rotten odor when some people get upwind to me."

Freen choked, reddened, set his teeth. He turned to follow the others inside, but, under his breath, he warned, "You'll get out, or you'll stay forever. And there's not much time to make your choice!"

After a while, Reno got up and started inside. Tulane and Freen had just come into the small, dingy lobby-parlor, and Reno heard Freen say, "You go on back over to the bank, Tom. I want to get a dry shirt from my room. This one's sweated through."

"Maybe I ain't been sweating," Tulane sighed heavily.

Freen didn't notice, as he climbed the stairs, that Reno had started up after him. Reno came to the top of the stairs just as Freen closed the door of his room. That room was just two doors down the narrow, musty hall from Reno's own.

This hadn't occurred to Reno before. Some of the proof he sought might be found in Big Jard Freed's room. It hit him full on now.

Reno sat on the side of his bed, looking down into the street, where yesterday, about this time, Red and Ivy had lain. He heard Freen leave his room, lock his door and go downstairs, and through the window, Reno watched him go to the bank.

Horseshoe took its siesta now. The bedraggled, dusty leaves of the cottonwoods near the bank were motionless and there was no apparent sign of life anywhere. Reno took the key from his own door, tiptoed down the hall, tried the key in Freen's lock. As Reno had figured, the key fitted, as it would have fitted any other door, or any other key would have fitted Reno's lock.

Inside Freen's room, he went quickly to work, searched the few pieces of tailored wearing apparel there, without result. His search revealed nothing—until he raised the mattress on the bed. Between the sagging bedsprings and the slats, a .30-30 carbine had been hidden!

Reno, seeming to freeze up inside, sniffed at the muzzle. That rifle had been fired recently, and hadn't been cleaned since!

CHAPTER VI
The Wolf-Pack

RENO replaced the rifle and returned to his own room. If Freen had been the rifleman who'd shot Red and Ivy down—the rifleman nobody had seen in the shuffle, and about whom nobody seemed to care—why all this secrecy?

Nobody, of course, would connect the sound of a gun from up here, while hell in general was being raised down there in the street, and Mark Nero was flaming a six-gun from the porch downstairs.

Freen, being up here— Why should he come down the hall to Tulane's room, cut loose with the rifle and then hide it afterward?

The answer suddenly came to Reno Wade. "Freen knew they were strangers, were comin' out of the bank, an' aimed to make sure they were dead an' couldn't talk!" he exclaimed aloud. "Why dammit, they ain't *been* no bank robbery a-tall—not from outside. Freen gets the money an' gets a tail-holt on Tulane, an' two outsiders is dead to cover up the whole damn thing! I bet they was just waitin' for some strangers to come along!"

But that third man? Well, Purdy Gowan hadn't been around when Red and Ivy had gone down . . .

Reno drew his gun from the holster, emptied the cylinder, cleaned it and oiled it. There was one thing he aimed to do, have a talk with Mister Moses Grove, soon as it grew dark and he could move around without being watched too much. Maybe Grove would leave on the stage tonight—and again, maybe not.

He went back downstairs, ignored the cold gaze of the hotel owner and mentally reserved something unpleasant for that customer in the future if he, Reno Wade, lived to have a future.

The rest of that afternoon he lounged around Sandusky's store. The few customers eyed him in an unfriendly manner, and Sandusky was finally moved to remark, "I can't seem to figgerate why you're a-hangin' 'round. You could get out of town after dark. Wouldn't be no trick a-tall. Afraid somebody'll foller you?"

"Maybe you'll get an answer to that before very long," Reno replied soberly.

As the sun began to set, he started for the saloon. Sandusky sighed, "That answer you spoke of," he allowed, "reckon I'll never get 'er, you go peckin' around over there. For sure as sin, you'll run in with Nero or Gowan or Freen—and Freen's worse nor his men. Nero, he's plumb patched up, an' pizen as a rattler that's bit hisself. He was in for terbaccy today."

Reno shrugged. Then, on sudden thought, dug in a pocket of his faded, soiled gray pants and came up with a flat little fold of bills.

"Sandusky, I don't care what you think, but will you promise, if I ask somethin', to keep 'er still for a few hours? No matter what, you'll hold your tongue?"

"I can sure do that. You bet."

Reno pressed the bills into Sandusky's withered paw. "In case," he said, "I come out like a sieve. You take this, an' see that them two fellers that was kilt yesterday, an' me, too, get a decent burial. Plant us together. Their names was Red Paris an' Bill Ivy."

Sandusky gulped, old eyes gone wide. "Then you was in with them!" he blurted.

"They wasn't bank robbers, an' I wasn't with them when they hit town. You got to believe that, at least for a spell—an' you promised, don't forget."

Sandusky gulped and nodded. He watched Reno stalk out into the deepening evening. And he muttered to himself: "I ain't lived these years for nothin'. I can smell trouble comin' ten mile away. That Wade, now, he's hell bent. I don't figger to know what she's all about, but I bet somebody besides him is dead before sunup!

Reno, his face set in an attitude of calm indifference, went into the saloon. The bartender blinked at him and hurried to put out a bottle and a glass. There were only a few customers present and they studiously avoided him. But of Nero and Gowan there was no sign.

Nero stood there waiting and drinking. If Freen or his men came in and started trouble, he aimed to accommodate them but if nothing happened, he'd go out and find Grove when it got real dark. He aimed that Grove should shed some light, willingly or not, on a lot of things.

He didn't see the rider who came in on the road from Kilgare. The man, a drifting gambler, stabled his horse, went to the hotel and washed up and waited in the lobby for the dining room to open.

UP in his room, Big Jard Freen flicked a speck of dust off his immaculate, fancy full boots, adjusted the scarf tied around the collar of his silk shirt and admired himself in the cracked, wavy mirror on the washstand. He uncorked a quart of whiskey, drank deeply, and left the room in the manner of a man well pleased with the world. He walked through the hall with a youthful stride.

He knocked on the door of the room Jean Tulane had taken. Reluctantly, the girl joined him and together they went downstairs.

They were just in time to hear the hotel owner answer a remark the gambling man had made.

"Yeah, we did have a robbery. But two of them was kilt. A red-headed feller, and a gray-haired one. Red one was—" and he went on to describe Red and Ivy. The gambler took the cigar from his mouth. "The hell!" he exclaimed. "That was the bunch that cleaned up over in Kilgare a couple days ago. Some of that bunch over there must have tried to 'bush them, too. There was a dead one from Kilgare found on the trail yesterday. It must have been the gray-eyed one, packing a bone-handled gun, that got off with the money."

"What's that?" Freen stepped forward, a little of the color gone from his face. "Can you describe the hombre?"

"Why, some," the gambler answered, a little puzzled, and he went on to put the tally on Reno Wade.

And as he talked on, Jean Tulane's little face grew set, her lower lip was caught between her teeth, and things seemed to be spinning before her eyes. It couldn't be, she told herself. There was something about Reno Wade that had attracted her, made her wish to know more of him. No—he just couldn't be that sort!

She was aware, then, that Freen had the gambler by the arm and was fairly dragging him toward the door, saying something about getting Deed Rice, and Nero and Gowan and going after Reno Wade.

She couldn't, in fairness to her father, try to warn Reno. Yet it seemed she couldn't bear to remain here and wait to hear the sound of shots. Perhaps there would be none? Perhaps Reno could explain himself? It certainly looked black for him, Jean admitted. She could not under-

stand herself. She only knew she was desperately afraid for him.

Outside, Deed Rice, with Freen, Nero and Gowan, went down the street, searching along the way for Reno Wade.

Reno, standing at the bar, was facing toward the door. He saw Nero's bandaged, plastered face when the gunnie looked inside. Nero jerked back, and something stirred within Reno—something warned him that hell was being primed.

He moved quickly to the front end of the bar, his fingers resting lightly on his gun. His nerves tingled and there was an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He watched the open space under those swinging doors.

He suddenly spotted those fancy boots Freen wore among the four pairs of feet that suddenly appeared. Reno's right arm described a fluid motion and his gun was drawn. He took two quick steps and was behind and to one side of one part of the door as it swung back and the four burst in.

The barkeep squawked a warning, but it came too late.

Deed, Freen, Nero and Gowan froze, their guns in their hands, as Reno's sharp, cutting voice dug their ears. "Not a damn one of you turn," he slapped at them. "Open your paws an' drop them guns."

Guns thumped the floor. Freen's face was murderous, Rice couldn't seem to understand and Nero and Gowan cursed sullenly.

Facing that room as he was, Reno commanded everything. No man toward the back offered to touch his hardware.

"Now," demanded Reno, "just what the hell is this?"

"You've been found out," Freen snarled. "You've been described as being one of the robber bunch. You were all together in Kilgare."

Reno hesitated and then ducked. The bartender fell down behind the bar and Reno guessed rightly that he might have a shotgun hidden there.

He tilted the muzzle of his six-gun, sent two quick shots into the ceiling and sped another slug to crashing glass along the backbar. Men yelped and dived for cover and to the floor. Freen and the three with him, leaped away. Reno jumped, hit the doors with his shoulder and spun on outside. He ran along the street, and the pack-cry of hunting men rang after him.

CHAPTER VII
The Masked Man

ON the outskirts of the town, Reno Wade hunkered in an old packing box turned on its side. Back in the village, the night was filled with sound. Groups of men with lanterns combed the buildings and alleyways. Men searched roofs, and the night was thick with the dust kicked up by their own and their horse's feet.

They yelled back and forth, someone loosed shots at a shadow and a group of men came riding down the road near where Reno hid.

Grim-faced, cursing his damnable luck, Reno held his gun unleathered and waited. What he'd do if they didn't find him and the search ended, he didn't know. Without a mount, he'd not get very far. And with one—well, he didn't aim to quit. . . .

Minutes dragged into a half hour. He shifted, cautiously rising to look up the road. He heard the snap of a whip, the bawl of a driver at horses, the rattle of harness and wheels. The faint, sickly yellow glow of stage coach sidelights, then, and Reno's purpose was suddenly clear—his decision was made.

He holstered his gun and moved, crouched low, close to the edge of the road. Dust choked him as the coach rattled past. Reno leaped out and broke into a run after it. He leaped,

got a purchase on the handrail on top. He hung there a moment but the jar of his body, it appeared, hadn't been noticed. Plenty of bumps in the road had covered that.

Slowly, he drew himself up, then bellied down behind blanket-rolls, boxes and telescopes lashed on the top of the stage. A few miles out, the driver cussed and pulled up. A few mounted men blocked the road.

"You seen ary sign of that bank robber?" one of them demanded.

Reno held his breath. The driver let go a blast of cuss words, informed the searchers he wasn't a man-hunter, hadn't seen a bandit and, furthermore, didn't give a damn if he never saw one. Then he let off his brake, used his whip and rolled on.

Reno only hoped that Moses Grove had taken this stage. Escape, and getting in touch with Grove—this stage offered both things to Reno Wade.

Another hour rolled by. The road ran again into the rising country and the timber Reno remembered.

The stage slowed as a long incline pulled down the speed.

"What the—" the driver began. The brakes clamped, the stage jerked and came to a sudden standstill.

Reno raised up cautiously. Passengers inside the stage were gabbling excitement. The dark figure of a masked man stood in the road beside the stage, and dim starlight reflected on his two guns. Through the neckerchief pulled around his face, the muffled voice of the man commanded, "All of you pile out. I mean all of you! You, on the box. One move an' you get it. You *sabe?*"

Stealthily, Reno eased his hand to his gun. The passengers piled out, hands high, Reno saw Moses Grove among them. There was silence then, while the road-agent passed his hat. Watches, money, a little jewelry went into it.

"Back inside, easy," he growled. "Wait. You there. Didn't you work for the bank in Horseshoe? Sure, you did. You're the one that yelled an' bellered an' got my partners shot. Damn you, come here."

"Hell," the driver complained. "It's the one they're huntin' in Horseshoe now."

His hand on his gun, Reno relaxed. He had to savvy this play.

"I didn't mean to," Grove was whining, sick with abject fear "Please—"

"Shut up! You, on the box. Get a-goin'. I'll be watchin' this road. You try turnin' back, you can figger what you'll get."

"Ain't turnin' back. But they'll be plenty after you soon's I hit Kilgare."

"Don't leave me!" Grove wailed. "Don't—" but his shrill voice was drowned by the noise of the stage as it started away.

As the sound faded away, leaving Grove and the masked man there i the road, Reno Wade crouched in clump of low weeds, barely more tha five yards away.

Grove was begging, crying that h hadn't meant to spread an alarm.

The other tore the handkerchief from his face. "Shut up, damn you," he grated.

"It ain't goin' to do you no good. Stop yer bellerin'."

"Purdy—Gowan," Moses Grove croaked. "I—I can't understand."

"No? You think Freen aimed to let you out of this country, knowin' as much as you do?"

"You don't mean—"

"It was planned for me to ride ahead, hold up the stage an' get you off? I sure do. Takin' the money an' gee-gaws off them others was just to make it look nice—an' some side-profit for me. Come on. Let's get off this road."

"No!" Grove shrieked.

"You goin'? I hate like hell to have to pack you off after I shoot you. Why don't you go like a man? Don't want nobody to find you for awhile, nohow,

An' when they do, that damn fool Wade'll get the blame."

GROVE went down on his knees in the dust. "No!" he cried. "I'll never tell. I'll never, and I'll give you that five thousand dollars Freen gave me. Tell him you shot me—"

"You'll lose the money anyhow," Gowan assured him. "An' I ain't crossin' Freen—not any. Get up, huddem you, or you want it here?"

"Please!" Grove staggered on his knees toward Gowan and the fear that struck him made a gibbering, begging, imploring spectacle of him.

"A'right," Gowan snarled, backing a couple of steps.

"You!" Reno barked.

Gowan let out a loud, startled grunt and spun to face the man who sprang up from the weeds. The roar of Reno's six-gun rang and echoed against the hills, and the thread of flame that came against the darkness from the muzzle unspooled straight at Gowan.

Gowan's breath broke from him heavily and, as the impact of the leaden slug struck him, slumped to the ground.

Reno sprang forward, his left fingers curling in the collar of Moses Grove's coat. He jerked the sagging man to his feet and held him erect.

Gowan's arms, and legs, made convulsive motions, billowing up a little rise of dust, and with a final shudder, Gowan sank back, dead.

Reno let go held breath, yanked the wobbly Grove off the road and jerked him around.

"Don't kill me," begged Grove. "Ahhh," his voice rose to a stricken whine once more as he made out to distinguish Reno's features, to learn his identity. "I—"

"Hush, damn you," Reno commanded. "Maybe there's a chance for you—If you talk—"

"No. Freen would kill me if I—"

"I'll beat you to death by inches, if you don't talk," said Reno, "now out with it!"

"I'll tell," moaned Grove. "It was Freen all the way. I don't know what over possessed me to listen to him. He's got a way. And he promised me lots of money. Money to go away, and get out of this country. God, I hate it here. He wanted money, cash, and he wanted to get a hold on the 2-T.

He aimed to get that water, and he swore he'd make that Tulane girl get down on her knees to him.'

"Because you wanted out, you fell for that?"

"Well, not all. I ran out back East. From a bonding firm. I—I used some of their money. Freen must've figured was something wrong. He got me drunk one night, and—I talked too much."

"Go on," Reno ordered. "An' you tell one lie—" He raised his left fist. Moses Grove winced and continued.

"It was figured to fix up an inside job to make it look like a bank robbery. How to cover it was the thing. Freen got the idea of waiting until some stranger came in the bank. It was sort of lucky he was in the back room the morning those two come in."

"Lucky? You figger so?" said Reno.

"No. I mean—Anyway, I—I kept them waiting, went back and told Freen, and they fixed things. Gowan went around behind the bank and waited. Freen knew Tulane was down at the store. He was expecting him back at the bank shortly, so he went to the hotel and got a rifle he had there, and went into Tulane's room. When I ran out and gave the yell, Nero was on the hotel porch, and he started a rumpus and shooting."

"That covered the fact Freen was making sure those men would never talk. Freen hid up there, because he didn't want folks to know he *expected* anything to take place."

Reno's voice was shaky, somehow terrible when he said, "Go on, damn your shrivelled, lousy soul."

"Well, Gowan rode off behind the bank. Nobody saw him, it was a blind. We never thought there'd really be a third man. When things died down, I hid fifteen thousand—about all the cash on hand. Turned ten thousand over to Freen, later. It was his orders that I quit and leave right away. Now—"

"Come on, and keep still before I loose the cinch on myself an' wring your neck," Reno snarled, shoving Grove stumbling ahead of him.

He found Gowan's horse well off the road. And riding with Grove cringing in front of him, Reno Wade started back to Horseshoe. And it wasn't his aim to seek the law's recourse. Red and Ivy had been gunned down. And, though it figured he'd get his own mark rubbed out, he reckoned to send Big Jard Freen and Mark Nero to hell before his trigger finger chilled.

CHAPTER VIII
Vindication

As he led the way through the gray light of breaking day, back of the business part of town, old Sandusky was perplexed. "It beats hell," he sputtered. "I couldn't figger 'er when you got me outta bed, an' I saw Grove with you," he declared. "Can you imagine them skunks cookin' up such a scheme?"

He went around and opened his front door, then let Reno and his prisoner in through the rear. "There's that storeroom I told you about. No winders, an' I'll be watchin'. He won't get out."

Trembling violently, Grove went in and they locked the door after him. Sandusky said, "You'd best wait. I wouldn't start nothin'. When Rice gets back—yeah, he's still out—I'll go to him an'—"

"Law ain't my pleasure," Reno tapped out. "Delays—maybe they'd get light sentences. Remember what Red an' Ivy got? Nope. You keep still. I'm doin' this my way," and he went grimly out into the street.

He found the hotel was quiet and went around the counter and tapped on the owner's door. The owner stirred and Reno heard him get up. The door opened and he stuck his head through. His squawk died when Reno's gun touched his paunch.

"You do ever'thing I say, an' nothin' else, you want to live," Reno advised. "Crawl up them stairs. Knock on Freen's door. Then Nero's. Tell them—an' keep your voice right—the posse is back an' Rice wants them *pronto*. Now get movin'!"

Upstairs, Freen answered the summons, called he'd be right down. Nero's answer was almost the same. Reno prodded the proprietor back downstairs. He had one question, "Did the Tulanes go home?"

"No. Tom took the room you had again. I moved out your stuff."

"Likely figgered you'd get to keep it," jeered Reno. He had no time to truss him up, so Reno applied his gunbarrel to his topknot, caught him as he slumped, dragged him around and dumped him behind the desk.

He stepped back, then, against the wall, where he couldn't be seen by Freen or Nero until they were almost at the bottom of the stairs. He didn't drag his gun. It wouldn't have seemed wrong to have shot them down, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to do that. Because Red and Ivy had had no chance, was no reason for Reno to pull a scurvy trick . . .

And he wanted Freen and Nero to go for their guns.

A drop of cold sweat ran down his back and there was a sickening sensation in the region of his stomach. His every nerve was taut and ready to snap. His breath came sibilantly through his teeth when he heard doors open upstairs, followed by footsteps descending.

Nero came first, looking back over his shoulder at Freen. Freen's gun-hand was at the bottom when Freen espied Reno crouched by the wall. He stopped, eyes wide, mouth agape. And Nero, sensing something wrong, looked over that way to.

"Huh!" Freen exploded. It was a signal for action, and that signal was obeyed..

Hands slapped bone or wood and metal, whacked against leather. Nero's feet made a raking sound as he shifted. His gun was free and leveling when Reno's pistol smashed sound against the walls—sound that seemed to rip the hotel wide apart. Nero went backward, arms flailing.

A BULLET ripped the wall where Reno had stood as he bent and swayed aside. He peered upward from under the brim of his hat, tilted his muzzle and let the hammer fall again. The bullet hit one of the banister supports and drove stinging splinters of wood into Jard Freen's face. He jerked as he shot and Reno felt the tug of the bullet as it ripped the crown of his hat.

He was hunkering almost on his heels, his eyes merciless. Freen spurted up and leveled his gun over the banister as Reno fired once more.

Doors were banging and someone was yelling upstairs. Reno, nose wrinkled against the fumes of burnt powder paid no attention. He watched Jard Freen hit the wall and carom forward, his fancy gun spilling from his hand. Freen doubled over the banister, clutched it frantically. He slid downward to the floor, his body resting partly on Mark Nero, who'd gone ahead of him.

A layer of gunsmoke drifted over them. And in death, they slept side by side . . .

Tom Tulane and Jean were the first ones downstairs. The girl was pale but she nerved herself, stepped over the bodies and came straight to Reno Wade. Reno was sick to his stomach, and visibly shaken, for he was not of the gun-trail type.

"You—you're all right?" whispered Jean.

"From now on," he managed to say and it seemed that she understood.

There was Sandusky, then, bringing Moses Grove and Grove's five thousand there at Reno's command. There was Tom Tulane and finally Deed Rice, dust-covered and weary. Then Grove was confessing all that had happened to the crowd in that room.

Later, there were buggies, wagons, saddle horses carrying ranchers, punchers, businessmen making a solemn, respectful procession to the Boothill on the slope outside of town. For these two men, there would be no pine boxes, no unmarked, owlhoot branded graves—their memory would be cherished forever in the little town of Horseshoe. And thus it was that they buried Reno's partners, Red Paris and Bill Ivy . . .

Tom Tulane and Jean stood nearby while Reno knelt to say his goodby. It was goodby too to Reno's wild, roving life. He murmured, *"Adiosita,* Red, ol' pal. S'long, Bill. You was right—a man should settle an' make hisself a home." Then he rose, joined the Tulanes and the three walked back toward the town.

"You know, of course, how this country feels toward you now," Tom Tulane began awkwardly. "If you'd stay, maybe we could sort of pay you for what you've done. Stay here. I've need of a man—"

"How do you feel?" Reno asked softly, turning to Jean. And the look in her eyes was his answer.

As Tom Tulane, a smile upon his face walked on, the girl halted.

"I think," said Reno in a low voice, weighing the horseshoe in his hand, "that I'm having a lot of luck."

He held out his arms and the girl came into them willingly . .

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BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR

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DUDE DEAD

Politeness Don't Pay

BEING a dude is a awful disadvantage. And being a English dude is a double dose of disadvantage, because even if one of them had any sense it wouldn't be legal for him to use it. Just look at that Lord Athole (that's his name, you dumb-heads) who is visiting out to Algy Twombley-Twombley's ranch.

This Athole wanted to shoot hisself a mountain lion. So after getting his boots well shined and his mustache waxed, he set out for the sierra accompanied by 18 Indians off'n the Reservation. (No, he didn't take the Indians along for bait: one of them was to carry his guns, another his cartridges, another his canteen and so on—with a couple left over in case he wanted to blow his nose or something.)

Anyways, when the party reached Gunsight Pass, a very large grizzly bear loomed up in the trail. Right away quick, the lord put on his gloves, called for a gun and drew a bead on the bear while the Indians took to the trees. Then just as the bear charged in, the Englisher pulled down his gun and said, "Oh, drat it!"

Of course that didn't stop the bear a-tall, because a bear does not even understand American, let alone English, and he came right on to gnaw on the lord in a very efficient manner.

Fortunately, however, the Englishman lived long enough to explain why he dropped his gun. When asked why he didnt shoot the bear he said, "Why, that deuced Indian handed me the wrong gun. One doesn't shoot a bear with a *lion* gun, y'know. Deucedly bad form, y'know."

Well, now, maybe it is deucedly bad form, but personally I think it would have

(*Continued next column*)

been deucedly good sense to shoot the deuced bear with any deuced gun which was handy. However, if a Englisher would rather be polite than alive, I guess that is his own dang deuced business.

PUBLIC NOTICE

THIS here malicious backtalk has got to stop! My reputation is getting besmirched, and I am getting pretty insulted about it.

Maybe you folks don't realize it, but us Toomeys is very proud people. We have been building outhouses for some forty years and we ain't done a poor job yet.

That is why I say it is only rumor and gossip. In fact, it is a dang lie! Nobody ever yet got, and nobody ever will get, any splinters in a building built by a Toomey.

(Signed) Two-hole Toomey
Builder and Designer De Luxe

CORPSE CRAMPED

But Unnaturalness Ain't Undertaker's Fault

ORDINARILY, when folks go to a funeral and take a look at the corpse in a casket, they all whisper and exclaim, "My! Don't he look Natural!" But nobody said that about Piñon Pete at his funeral the other day. Instead, everybody seemed inclined to criticize Dan Sawyer for giving Pete such a poor job of undertaking.

But then, I guess most folks didn't know that Dan was fresh out of Man Size Coffins and had to put Pete in a Boy Size One. Even after cutting off Pete's legs at the knees, Dan had a hell of a time making him fit. But he finally got all of Pete's corpse stuffed into the box, so I think that he ought to be given a lot of credit, not criticism. He done a right good job, considering.

DIGNITY DESTROYED

Badge Brings Blushes

THE last meeting of the Town Council was a mighty dull affair until Mrs. Douglas got up to make a speech. And I don't mean that her speech was lively, either, because it was the usual protest about something or other, which a group of Ladies is always making.

Anyways, after about fifteen minutes of Mrs. Douglas saying, "*We* want this," and "*We* don't want that," etc., Councilman Hayes interrupted her long enough to ask who in hell was "We."

At first Mrs. Douglas just glared at him, but then seeing he wasn't being sarcastic, she swelled her already ample bosom and pointed to the badge pinned on it, saying with a great deal of dignity, "This is the symbol of my authority."

Well now, that badge with the blue ribbon and gold seal Mrs. Douglas was wearing was supposed to say "President of Ladies Friday Club." But I guess she must have got dressed in a hurry and made a miscue, for the badge she showed the Councilman read,

STATE FAIR
First Prize
Best Poland China Brood Sow
With Litter

FINNEGAN'S FIBBING

WELL, it is your own dang fault. You citizens kept talking so much about what a hard winter we're having that Forty-niner Finnegan got to remembering back to the old days. And he finally remembered back to the Year of the Big Snow. He says that stock got so thin that year that stockmen stacked their steers like shingles and shipped them in bales. And that folks who planted winter wheat got a crop so short they had to lather it before they could cut it.

HOFFMAN HELL BENT

Citizen Incinerated

NOBODY can say that Cactus City citizens ain't tolerant and easy going. They will stand for a whole lot from dudes, and will even tolerate a certain amount of uppishness among theirselfs.

For instance, folks didn't say nothing when Pegleg Pierce discarded the pine sapling which he used for a leg and made one out of oak; that was all right. It was even all right when Trapper Truman sent away for a leg made out of mahogany and duded hisself up with same.

But the climax came last Sunday, and said climax was just too much for Cactus Citizens. In a spirit of Righteous Indignation, a group of citizens, full of Civic Pride and Whiskey, built a big bonfire and into it tossed that new wooden leg of Hoppity Hoffman's, without even bothering to detach said leg from Hoppity.

Hoppity, you see, had forced folks' patience and tolerance just a little too far when he busted out with a wooden leg made of *bird's-eye maple*. With that leg, Hoppity thought he was pretty much duded up —and I guess he was. He was dressed to kill!

REMEDY REFUSED

WHEN Hungry Houston got piled off'n a bronc he sure got shook up and bruised. But Doc Donnelly couldn't find nothing wrong with him but a skull fracture and a few miscellaneous broken bones, so he told Hungry just to rest up for a few days.

"But the pain, Doc," moaned Hungry. "Can't you stop that?"

"Well," said Doc, "you might try a mustard plaster."

"Oh gosh no!" he wailed. "I tried one of them things once before."

"Didn't it do the work?" asked the Doc.

"Yeah," admitted Hungry. "It worked all right—but it shore bit my tongue when I was chewin' it down."

SPONGE SPENCER'S LAST SPASM

Woman Welcomes Widow's Weeds

WELL, Mrs. Sponge Spencer finally is a widow and can wear black dresses, which she looks so handsome in and which she has always wanted to wear. In fact, there is a rumor going around that Mrs. Spencer wanted to wear black clothes so bad that she let her husband kick the bucket unnecessarily.

But of course that is only rumor and probably the result of Doc Donnelly's grumbling. Doc had been doctoring Sponge for D.T.'s and was pretty exasperated to lose another paying patient. When he heard about Sponge dying he rode right out and demanded of Mrs. Spencer, "Why didn't you give him some of that medicine? I told yuh a shot of that stuff would save Sponge whenever he got to the point of seein' pink leopards with green spots!"

"Yes, I know, answered the new widow, trying to look mournful. "But right up to the last, Sponge insisted that the pink leopards he was seeing had *blue* spots."

So you see, there is no basis for the rumor that Mrs. Spencer helped Sponge over the divide. She was only following the doctor's orders, and her liking to wear black dresses is only a coincidence.

ABE IS HONEST

New Clerk Don't Cheat

CITIZENS will be very pleased to know that Short-weight Weston has got a new clerk in his General Store. Now, of course that in itself ain't news on account of Shirt-weight is always having a new clerk at his place. But the interesting thing about this new clerk, whose name is Abe, is that he is practically Honest.

Now, that don't mean that he don't know a lot of tricks about the store Business, because he does. He can get 10 ten-pound packages of beans from a hundred pound sack, and still have maybe twenty

(*Continued next column*)

LEGAL DEPT.

Yuma Lawyer Thinks Up a Brand New Alibi

EVERYBODY figured that Deuce Dugan was just wasting his money when he imported a lawyer from Yuma, because it looked like not even a lawyer could save Deuce from hanging this time.

But when the trial commenced, this shyster got to his feet and demanded that Deuce be turned loose on account of he had been arrested on false charges.

"What d'yuh mean—false charges?" bellered the Judge. "Dugan admitted he killed eight men last week, didn't he?"

"Yeah, an' that is just my point," answered the shyster. "Killin' eight men ain't murder —it's war! An' there ain't no law against war!"

pounds left. But of course that ain't Genuine Dishonesty. It is only Sharp Business or Legitimate Cheating, and it ain't to be confused with Common Everyday Honesty, like he has got.

Just as a example of what I mean, I will tell you what happened in Short-weight's store the other day. Mrs. Dinwiddie come into the store and made a purchase and gave Abe a twenty-dollar gold piece. And when Abe gave her the change, he accidentally gave her change for only a ten-dollar gold piece. But being in a hurry, Mrs. Dinwiddie didn't notice, and neither did he. Not, that is, until Mrs. Dinwiddie had left. Then as he got to thinking it over, he realized what he had done, so he took the extra ten dollars out of the cash register.

But did Abe salt that ten dollars in his pocket and say nothing about it? No, indeed! Like I'm telling you, this Abe is honest. Instead of keeping that extra ten he split it fifty-fifty with Short-weight, and only kept five dollars for hisself.

There! I guess that shows you what kind of man Abe is. Not very bright maybe—but honest to the core!

A Novelette of Mystery On The Range

BOBWIRE

Tex Geary would always fight for the underdog, be it man or beast—but that day in Blue Rim Basin he had to turn against his own saddle mates to remain true to his code, or back down to a double-crossing bunch of renegades who'd even use a helpless girl in their ruthless war for more range.

CHAPTER I
A Dog's Life

WHEN Tex Geary looked into a clear pool in a small mountain stream at dawn and saw reflected there a grim and bitter face with range tan once the rich brown color of an old saddle now changed to a pasty milk chocolate hue, his vow to ride down from the Blue Rim and argue it out with tongue or gun to Sam McCreary tightened in his heart like steel. The picture in that pool labelled the son of an honored Texas Ranger to all the Wyoming range world as a jailbird, a braider of horse-hair bridles.

Sam McCreary, one of the small cattle ranchers who had cut their clearings from the virgin timber in Blue Rim Basin, had put Tex Geary behind the bars, sworn to the warrant that charged Tex with the murder of McCreary's partner, Harp Slagle.

LAW!

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

As Curly Sparks jerked on the tight lariat, the old watch dog came forward to fight for its master . . .

Leaf mould, rubbed on pale features, hid to some extent Geary's hangdog look. But leaf mould couldn't reach a man's half-broken heart. So, while thirty miles south, a town stewed over the hot news of a midnight break from jail, Tex rode down through the timber seeking that which would ease his hurt.

Sliding his pony down the slippery ridges within the lodge-pole patch that loomed over the basin, Tex reflected that by this time a sheriff's posse would be following his plain trail hoping to overtake him before he crossed the Montana line. Ruthless guns would be carried by those riders of the law. They would give him small chance for his life if he refused to surrender at the first command.

The mysterious friends—masked men—who had held up the lone night jailer, secured the ring of keys, unlocked Geary's iron corral, had urgently advised him to put plenty of space between Red Bank and his pony before the sun came up. They had furnished him with a speedy horse, a

gun belt draped over the horn, slicker tied to the saddle, and a sack of grub.

And here he was at sunup, turning off the trail that meant life and freedom, to face down the man who had accused him of murder and forced from him a confession. Tex believed that Sam McCreary might have killed his own partner and then laid the blame on the lanky pilgrim from the Pecos who had arrived in Wyoming, but a few weeks before, hired out to Rufe Boudett's outfit as a line-rider, and then become involved in a war of words over the barbed-wire drift-fence which Rufe was building, despite ranchers' protests, along the high bench above the basin.

McCreary had found Slagle shot to death beside the drift-fence. One strand of wire had been cut, apparently by the murdered man. A gun, with stained ivory butt stocks, known as Geary's pet Colt, had been discovered in brush near the trail as though popped from its holster as the killer fled from the scene. So they had arrested Tex.

His lean jaws tightened as he pictured that bitter scene when he had ridden in at nightfall, weary from trailing a runaway string of his ponies through the hills. He had rounded up all but a pinto cayuse. When the sheriff, supported by McCreary and other grim ranchers, had met him wilth drawn guns, they had already found this pinto, streaked with the salt of hard riding, grazing in a small canyon near the line-cabin. They had shown Tex the gun they had found in the brush. The gun which Tex had owned and which had drilled a slug through Slagle's back. They had also pointed out the tracks of the pinto leading away from the drift-fence.

When he told them that his horses had strayed, they listened unbelievingly, asked him to produce some truthful man to testify to his whereabouts. When he couldn't do that, McCreary had cursed him as Boudett's hired killer from Texas, and put his name on the complaint that supported the warrant for first-degree murder.

McCreary, a clear-eyed youth, maimed because his left hand had once been caught between lariat rope and saddle horn as he roped a mossy horn bull, had looked at Tex as though the latter were a mangy wolf. That especially struck Tex to the heart for he was the son of a Texas Ranger. His father had bequeathed him that old gun on the ivory butt of which was carved a longhorn steer's head. Tex's father had died on duty with that gun clutched in his right hand. No man could class it as a thug's weapon and get away with it. Not while Tex Geary rode free on any range . . .

He halted his horse, and slowly drew a carbine from its boot. He might reach Montana. He didn't care. First he would take time out for a little visit with the man who had named him as a low-down coyote killer.

He tied up his pony, slipped to the edge of the timber that loomed above the McCreary clearing. It was his first visit to the place. His work for Rufe Boudett had lain along the high rim-rocked divide to the east.

He saw a neat little cabin, with wild flowers growing in the dirt roof, a clothes-line with garments that certainly didn't belong to a man fluttering from it. He even marked an old dog asleep on the porch steps and a thin curl of smoke from the chimney that denoted a quick hot fire for breakfast biscuit baking.

The sight of the feminine togs on the line disarmed Tex. It had been in his mind to call for a showdown with McCreary, smoke him up if he didn't talk to the point. Lounging around a cell, Tex had tried to solve Slagle's murder and had finally arrived at the conclusion that McCreary might have killed his own partner thus taking

over Sagle's share in the O Cross cattle. There had been such crimes before in the West.

Then down the green little meadow by the creek, a buck deer broke cover, came leaping across the grass with antlered head flung back for swift flight under low-hanging branches in the forest.

Tex Geary clicked a shell into his carbine, flattened out on the ground, lay silent there in the morning shadows.

If the sight of the laundry had made Tex hesitate—for he didn't wish to mix women into a business of murder —then the swift thud-thud-thud of the buck across the meadow put fear into his heart. For the animal's panic told him that humans were coming up the creek. And if they approached so cautiously, it also indicated to Tex that they wished to remain unseen while scouting out the clearing.

It must be the posse searching for him, armed to the teeth, ready to kill if the fugitive didn't surrender on sight.

Tex Geary, quitting the jail with his masked rescuers, had sworn that never again would iron bars cut off his liberty, break his heart and pride.

Of that he was certain as he cocked his carbine and covered the spot in the bullberry brush, from which the buck had emerged, with the ivory head of his front sight.

Three men rode out on the green grass, their riding gear shining in the light where the sun flashed from metal work on spurs, guns, and saddles. With a start of surprise, Tex saw that the chief was the bearded giant who had hired him as a line-rider, who had spoken as his friend when the law took Tex off to jail.

There rode Rufe Boudett. And the men who trailed him were Curly Sparks, foreman of Boudett's spread, and lank-jawed Calico Bill Kopps, a man on the Boudett payroll.

A grin came to Geary's tired, grimy face. For he had suspected, during the jailbreak, that his rescuers were from Boudett's outfit although they hadn't named Rufe or themselves. Relieved that he wasn't watching a sheriff's posse, Tex took the rifle stock away from his shoulder. He was about to stand up, shout his name, go down to the three riders, when a slim man stepped from the cabin out into the sunlight. He wasn't fifty yards from Tex, and the fugitive quit smiling, frowned, tightened his grip on his rifle. There stood Sam McCreary, for he was easily enough recognized by the steel hook he wore on his left arm in place of the hand he had lost.

Curly Sparks, a lithe and well-built man, the sort who runs to a bold dark dashing appearance enhanced by fancy hats and chaps, shook out a rope.

"What do you want?" Sam McCreary asked curtly.

Sparks rolled his spurs. His high-headed roan cayuse lunged ahead. The small Utah-style noose, flashed without a single twirl above the rider's head, snapped down around McCreary's neck.

Calico Bill Kopps, so-called by Boudett punchers because his brick-red mop of hair bleached out under the sun to a mottled color, raced his pony straight up to where McCreary had grasped the tight lariat to prevent Curly Sparks from dragging him off his feet and strangling him to death or breaking his neck.

Leaning from his saddle, Calico struck McCreary savagely on the head with the shot-loaded butt of his quirt. The rancher fell in a sprawl on his door step. Rolling off his horse, Calico then jerked a hogging string from around his lean middle, roped up the senseless man as though he were a calf for the branding fire, passed the noose down under McCreary's armpits.

The old watch dog, waddling in to fight for its master, was kicked aside

by the lanky cowpoke. It crashed against a doorstep, lay quivering, and gasping for wind.

Watching this attack, big Rufe Boudett sat calmly on a flank of the affair, a wide grin on his bristly chops.

As Calico completed his job of hogtieing Sam McCreary and stunning the rancher's dog with a brutal kick, Boudett rocked in his saddle with laughter.

He yelled to his foreman. "Now we'll plow under them flower beds with the nester that owns 'em!"

The old dog, wobbling up on shaky legs, made a last lunge as Calico Bill swung up on his nervous mount. The dog lacked most of its teeth, but one fang caught in the slack of Calico's blue overalls, apparently touched skin for he yelled, cursed, and swung around to shake off the animal that clung to him like death.

Boudett flipped up a six-gun, centered on the dog.

"Get outa line," he yelled to Calico. "I'll put that hound outa this game!"

Up in the timber, Tex Geary came to his boots, carbine rising toward his shoulder as he watched this fight wherein a faithful old dog would die in defense of its master.

Tex couldn't explain the emotion that had gripped him. There rode the men he had worked for, the riders he believed had freed him from jail, furnished him with horse and riding gear to quit this range. They were tormenting a man he blamed for a first-degree murder charge laid against his honorable name, a man he felt sure had committed that murder then cunningly framed the Texas pilgrim because Tex had no friends or connections in this northwestern country.

Despite all this, Tex Geary raised his gun. He wasn't sure just what he would do next. But there wasn't time to step from cover and order Boudett to put up his gun.

Tex Geary knew this as he cocked his rifle. That Boudett would not be allowed to kill a faithful old beast that had committed no crime except defending its master.

Then, as Calico stormed and cursed, seeking to free the dog from his overalls, a girl in a blue gown rushed around the front of the cabin. She carried a shotgun. The sun gleamed on the braids of her blond bright gold hair, on the rounded lines of youthful grace revealed as the keen morning wind pressed the gingham dress against her body.

She pitched up the shotgun, stepping between Boudetts line of fire and the watch dog.

"Git her outa the way!" yelled Rufe, spurring his pony to one side for a straight shot.

Calico kicked the dog and it spun down from the porch. The girl dropped her shotgun, picked up the beast as it crawled toward her and licked her hand.

Boudett roared again. "Clear the line, Calico! All same man, all same dog."

Calico flung his long arms around the girl, lifted her away from the dog. It whined pitifully and tried to follow. Boudett was riding nearer, leaning down with his gun barrel poised for a sure shot.

The girl pleaded and Tex could hear the sobbing note in her voice.

"Don't kill Rover. Take it out on us, Boudett, but don't kill him. He's old, half blind, and his teeth are worn out. He didn't do anything but what he thought was right. Boudett—don't be a brute!"

Calico laughed harshly, shut off her words with a tight embrace. Boudett nodded to his man as though commending him for it. But the big cattleman was intent on this job of killing a dog.

Curly quietly sat on his horse, lariat taut to the hogtied form of Sam McCreary.

When Boudett finished his work, Curly would spur his pony to a slow

gallop, drag Sam through the scant little beds where his sister had planted a few old-fashioned flowers to relieve the grim monotony of this clearing.

Tex Geary stepped from the timber, rifle held ear-high. He had been schooled in marksmanship as a boy by his father who had carried a gun of honor with the Rangers. He fired now with the expert's quick flip of weapon, the swift drag on the trigger, almost before the stock struck solidly into the curve between his shoulder and cheek.

The bullet burned past Rufe Boudett's shaggy head, caused him to whirl around, forget the dog in evading this greater danger.

There he saw Tex Geary, the Texan's lean figure outlined by the blue background of lodge-pole pines.

"That killer pilgrim!" roared Boudett, and as he swung his gun, Tex smashed another bullet that cut the hipbone of his pony and flung the animal into a real pitching exhibition.

Curly rolled his hooks, started for the flower beds where the hogtied Sam McCreary was coasting at the end of a forty-foot line like a sled. Tex turned his smoking rifle, shot Curly from leather. As he fell, the foreman released the rope dallies around his saddle-horn. Cam McCreary lay there within a foot of a bed of red geraniums.

Calico was holding the girl as a living shield. He had drawn his sixgun, and was trying to fire past her struggling body. The faithful old dog got up on its wobbling legs, and with its last ounce of strength, attacked the man who had crushed its ribs with brutal kicks.

Startled by Rover's rush, Calico dropped the girl and she fell to her knees. Then she crawled toward the shotgun.

Tex was coming down from the timber on the run. He shouted to Calico as he came in.

"Get on yore hoss and ride!"

He punctuated his command with a bullet that dug up dirt between Calico's boots. The lanky man whirled, rushed toward his pony, climbed into the saddle. Old Rover fell back to the ground but with half the seat of Calico's overalls clinging to his worn-out fangs.

Tex reached the girl just as she flipped up the shotgun and centered it on Rufe Boudett.

The cattleman, riding high on his bucking horse, and unable now to defend himself with a gun, was a fair target.

But Tex reached the girl just in time to knock down the shotgun. The buckshot charges buried themselves in the flower beds.

"Let him go," Tex said gently, "You wouldn't want to kill a man who can't fight back."

"They tried to kill old Rover."

Tex grinned, surveyed the rags hanging from Rover's muzzle, and what he would have sworn that there was a satisfied look on the old dog's grizzled chops.

"I reckon," he said softly, "that they regret now what they just tried."

CHAPTER II
No Truce

CALICO crashed down in the brush along the creek. His boss quieted his mount, turned back to where Tex Geary stood quietly with rifle resting in his arms beside the girl who had rushed to cut away the ropes that imprisoned her brother's unconscious body.

Out in the meadow, Curly Sparks sat up and dazedly rubbed a bump on his head where a bullet had creased him, knocked him senseless from leather.

Boulett's black eyes flashed with a savage anger. Every hair in his matted beard, which was as black and coarse

as the tail of a horse, appeared to bristle with rage. But Boudett, aware of Tex's deadly aim, bit down on his wrath with his big yellow teeth.

"Tex," he rasped, "what come over yuh?"

"I reckon," Tex drawled, "it was the dog."

"A dog shouldn't come between a man and his friends. When you was up against it, me an' my outfit stood up for yuh against these grangers. These valley rats like Sam McCreary who wanted to git yuh hung for killin' Slagle."

Tex Geary looked sheepish. Boudett certainly was heaping coals of fire on his head. Telling the straight truth. Boudett had believed him innocent when the whole country turned on him as a coyote killer. And he had repaid that loyalty by interfering in Boudett's raid on McCreary's place.

"Just the same," Tex said slowly, grave gray eyes on his late boss, "Mister Boudett, in all respect to yuh, yuh shouldn't try to kill a dog. Rover there is nuthin' but a pore dumb brute. Like a man's old saddle hoss or milk cow. He don't know nuthin' except to fight for the man who feeds him an'—an'—mebbe loves him a little. It's about all a dog can do for a man. And nine times out o' ten they do it. Mister Boudett, a big man like you orter honor Rover for doin' that instead o' tryin' to blow out his brains with a .45 slug."

"By God, "Boudett growled, narrowing his eyes, stiffening in his saddle, "you picked up the sky pilot line while you was bleachin' out in jail. This talk of a dog—the damn brute was tryin' to chaw a laig off Calico Bill. A good man of mine like you was before."

Tex shrugged. "Well, Calico still has all his laig left. And Rover's alive. I'm no sky pilot, Mister Boudett, but I told yuh how come I busted into this thing."

Boudett laughed harshly, looked down at the girl who, strangely enough, had lost interest in her brother, and was listening intently to the argument.

"Well," Boudett said sarcastically, "I suppose all you was interested in was the dog. The McCreary blonde didn't have nuthin' to do with it."

"The McCreary's are nuthin' to me," Tex said bluntly, but he knew in his heart that it was not the truth.

"You'd save a dog, but not interfere when Curly started to give Sam a ride through the posies. Even though Sam had been jumped by three men. And was a cripple," said the girl in amazement.

Just then Sam McCreary opened his eyes, sat up groaning. He listened groggily as Tex answered slowly. "I jumped jail last night. I come down here to see McCreary. I won't stir a foot from this range until I git a showdown with him. I didn't want Curly to crack his damned neck——"

The girl sprang up, blue eyes flashing. She whirled on Tex.

"You think more of a dog than a man?"

"Most of the time," growled Tex.

"I suppose you learned that in jail. They say criminals put in their time making pets of spiders and mice."

'The Red Bank jail, ma'am, didn't run to spiders an' mice. Some bugs but not the kind yuh wanted for pets."

Boudett laughed harshly. "I was for you, Tex," he said as he rode over toward Curly. "But this rips the record between us. I'll put out all the men I got on the U Bar L crew to put you behind the bars again. And I'll back up the law with my bank account to git yuh hung for Slagle's murder."

"Thanks for the warning, Mister Boudett. Only—don't kick no more dogs or try to shoot 'em while I'm hangin' around."

Boudett turned his back on Tex, rode over, kicked his right boot from a stirrup, and bade Curly, whose mount had disappeared in the timber,

crawl up behind. Then, with his henchman hanging to his belt, Boudett rode down into the creek brush.

Sam McCreary sat on the ground, head in his hands, or rather his hand, for he supported his good right arm with the shining hook of steel.

"I suppose you should be thanked for saving Rover. So I thank you," the girl said stiffly to Tex.

Tex answered as bruskly. "Thanks from the McCreary clan don't mean a thing to me. I'd save the dog of a red Injun from the sort of punishment Rover was gittin'. Anyway I never did like that Calico Bill."

"Just the same," her voice was steady enough despite the slight quiver of her round chin, the dampness in her blue eyes, "just the same I—I do thank you. And I'd like to shake your hand."

She extended a small hand that was daintily formed but hard and rough from the unending toil of cooking, washing, baking in a rancher's cabin.

Tex walked over to Rover. Anger welled up in him again. He hated the McCrearys, hated them most of all now because they were working on his resolution to put Sam McCreary to the acid test. They had such things to work with as faithful dogs, pretty girls, quiet men with crippled bodies who never whined.

Tex bent and patted Rover's head. The old dog, a cross between a collie and a stag hound, looked up with deep brown eyes, licked Geary's hand.

"Ol' feller," muttered Tex, "it's a damn funny world, ain't it?"

What he meant was that the world was strangely hostile to pilgrims from Texas who desired nothing but to earn an honest living and mind their own affairs. They became involved in cold murder, were thrown into jail on faked evidence, brought back into conflict to save hated enemies.

Tex heard a light step behind him, then a round arm went hesitantly around his brown neck. He sought to brush that arm aside, felt the lightest flutter of red lips on his cheek. On the cheek bleached by jail tan.

"I don't care what the world says," the girl whispered before she fled into the cabin. "But I think you're a man, Tex Geary."

He stood there, bulge-eyed, jaw hanging foolishly, rifle forgotten on the ground. Nor did he note that Sam McCreary, rising dizzily from the earth, saw the tall Texan, cursed between his teeth, reached inside the waistband of his overalls for the sixgun he had not until now had a chance to draw.

The McCreary girl, just stepping up on the porch, flustered and redfaced because she had kissed a man who wouldn't shake hands, heard Sam's curse.

She whirled around, saw her brother pitch up his gun, stand weaving on his boots, blinking his eyes, striving to line on the small of Tex Geary's back.

"Sam!" she shrieked. "Not that!"

And she flung herself toward Sam, hoping to reach him before he killed Tex.

Her cry aroused Tex. He spun around on his spiked boots, leaped toward the carbine on the ground. Sam was still unsteady on his feet, bewildered by the glare of the sun in his eyes, but yet savagely determined to kill this man he recognized as the accused killer who by all rights should be in a Red Bank cell.

Even as Geary bent, reaching with brown hands for his gun, the thought flashed into his mind that to save himself he must kill Sam McCreary, kill the one-handed brother before the eyes of the man's own sister. Something choked up in Geary's throat. There was a strange slackening in the beat of his heart, a lessening of that burning desire for vengeance which had caused him to delay escape to Montana.

He knew, as he grasped his weapon, that he could no more kill Sam McCreary than he could hold back his gunfire to save a faithful dog.

Rover again interfered in this little game of life and death. For to Rover it now appeared but a game. Were not all these people his friends? Men could not deceive a dog like Rover. Not on the points of men like Tex Geary and Sam McCreary.

Old Rover went blundering toward his master, leaped up clumsily so that he disturbed the aim of Sam McCreary. The man sought to beat the dog aside. But Rover persisted, his big red tongue hanging out from his mouth, a little friendly whine far back in his throat.

Then the girl reached Sam, flung her arms around him, pleaded with him, pointed out that which he didn't know, that Geary had come here as a friend, not as an enemy. That he had saved their pet from death, and in so doing, had rescued the McCrearys from the clutch of Rufe Boudett.

Sam ceased struggling and his six-gun hung by his pants seams limply. The red look faded from his eyes. And as he stared at Tex Geary it was as though he were looking at a stranger.

"I didn't know," Sam whispered. "How was I to know? They knocked me out. Stranger—I'm shore apologizin' for what I wanted to do."

Then Sam reached out his right hand as his sister had done. But Geary, with a cold look in his gray eyes, refused to shake.

"Yo're damn quick," he told Sam, "on jumpin' at conclusions. Yore quickness put me in jail for Harp Slagle's killing."

"What would you expect? You were line rider for Boudett. You'd fought with Slagle over that drift fence. Then—when he was found shot to death and yore six-gun nearby—what would a man believe?"

"When I left my cabin that mornin'," said Tex grimly, "I went out to find the hosses missin' from my corral. I thought those ponies had broke down the gate and got away. Now I know they was deliberately turned out. Why? So the killer or killers of Slagle could get me away while he laid out to ambush yore partner. Another thing. When he turned out my hosses, he cut back the paint pony to leave tracks the law could read. Tracks pointin' from the scene of the crime to my cabin. Further—he stole my father's gun. The old gun that hung in the cabin, a gun that never killed a man except in fair fight. And he used that same gun to kill Slagle and frame me. Me—a plumb foreigner to this country, therefore picked as a goat because he had quarreled a trifle with Slagle over a damned wire fence."

Sam McCreary licked his dry lips. "You knew that the drift fence meant somethin'. That Boudett run it after he had been charged with runnin' lots of small ranchers outa the country. Terrorizin' 'em like he tried on me today. You've seen the black spots on the Blue Rim where Boudett's men set fire to cabins."

Tex nodded. "I've seen the burnt shacks. But all I knew was this. I hit this range without a dime. Boudett offered me a job. He told me to watch that fence. I tried to earn my money—and ended up in a jail. You an' all the others wouldn't believe a word I said. You found me guilty before a jury had even heard my plea. It wasn't American, McCreary. It wasn't fair. And I busted jail last night and come here to sweat it out of you—"

The girl interrupted. "Sweat my brother? Why?"

Tex said grimly, "Slagle was his partner. How come he got to the scene of the killin' so quick?"

She cried out angrily, "Are you calling Sam a murderer?"

"No. But I'm out to sweat every man who knows anything about it. I'm like yore dog, Rover. I'll fight with

what teeth I got. I'll fight to prove that my dad's old gun never put a bullet through any man's back."

He strode toward Sam McCreary who gave ground, a pleading look in his eyes, for gray-eyed Tex Geary, face blanched with the pallor of a murderer's cell, was a figure of vengeance. A big-shouldered rider, rawboned, tough of body as a prairie wolf. He laid his hard right hand on Sam's shrinking shoulder and the man groaned for Geary's fingers bit deeply into his flesh like claws of steel.

Then the McCreary girl, fierce as a hen guarding her chicks from a hawk's swooping attack, flung her slight body against Geary, fought with all her might to ward off the Texan's manhandling of her brother.

As they struggled there, from the timber down the creek, a rifle cracked. A bullet thudded into the porch steps, flung splinters into the air.

On the echo of the rifle shot, Calico Bill came spurring up from the brush above the cabin.

Rufe Boudett had retreated. But not too far. He had chosen an opportune moment to split his forces, launch an attack.

Tex Geary picked up the girl, flung her bodily toward the open door of the cabin. Then he rapped Sam McCreary with his rifle stock, a brisk blow to quicken the man to anger.

"Hike for cover!" Tex rasped. "I'll stand off this skunk until you git yore sister sheltered. Me—" a grim smile creased his face, "me an' Rover."

For the old dog had turned, with a husky growl, to face the charge of Calico Bill.

CHAPTER III
Hands Up!

CALICO BILL believed he could run down Tex with his wall-eyed horse. Then it would be easy enough for Rufe and Curly Sparks to enter the cabin, overpower her brother and work their will on the McCreary girl.

So Geary stood under the blazing sun, Geary and the old dog, standing between men he had counted as friends and those he classed as foes.

Calico's horse came up so swiftly, rider planted low like a jockey in the saddle, that Tex's fast rifle fire failed to check the stride.

Flashing hoofs beat the air over his head. An iron shoe would crack his skull. He dropped to his knees, heard the deafening roar of Bill's gun.

From the timber down the creek, Rufe Boudett rode out howling like a Comanche Indian, certain Calico had grounded the Texan. Curly Sparks, mounted again, for they had found Geary's horse tied up in the timber, followed more slowly. Curly's head still rang like a gong from the bullet slap administered by Geary's .30-30.

Old Rover, half blind but never the dog to miss a fight, sprang up and buried his worn teeth in the plunging pony's off front leg.

Calico was holding a tight rein, rolling spurs from withers to flanks, throwing lead with his smoking gun at the dodging man on the ground who moved like a groggy boxer seeking to dodge both horseshoes and soft-nosed Colt slugs.

But the range pony, terrified beyond control at the sight and feel of the fangs of dogs, coyotes, or wolves, broke one of Calico's bridle reins with the straining jerk of its muscular neck. It began to buck in a circle, seeking to pitch off both Calico and the dog.

Calico dared not drop from the saddle. Nor did he care very much to stay in it. He was a man between the devil and the deep blue sea. Or—up here in midland mountain country—a high riding gunman between a dangerous bronc and a dog whose bark always meant a good bite.

Calico sawed on the single rein he clutched which caused his cayuse to pitch in a circle. Tex Geary, getting up to attack Calico from the flank, sank a boot heel in a conglomeration of petunias and marigolds, and the pony jumped cleanly over his prostrate body with old Rover's wooly body flying through the air like a shaggy buzzard.

Rufe Boudett, passing the shack at a hard gallop, gun held high for a throwdown on Tex who sprawled in the flower bed, yelled like a maniac as the McCreary girl rushed out the cabin door with a steaming tea-kettle she had picked off the breakfast fire. She raised it high as Rufe went past, gave a roundhouse swing, and showered Rufe and his horse with scalding water.

Then two ponies were bucking for first money in the McCreary's front yard.

Tex Geary recovered balance while the girl rushed back to refill the tea-kettle. Sam appeared with the shotgun, snapping brass shells into the double barrels.

Calico's panting pony sunfished past the Texan, Rover still getting a free ride. Tex swooped out with both arms, clutched the leather fringe of Calico's chaps, jerked the red-haired gunman from leather. Calico fell so hard that the breath went out of his lungs in one vast *woosh*.

Sam saluted Rufe with both barrels of the gun. The buckshot would have riddled the cattleman except for the lucky plunge of his bucking horse as the animal tried to jump over the McCreary girl's little chicken coop.

Curly Sparks, following more leisurely, hearing the gun, swung his pony to retreat toward the safe timber. As he rode off, he hung his chin on his shoulder attentively watching Sam. So he didn't observe the clothesline that barred his path. It hooked under his chin and broke away but Curly stampeded for the woods, half strangled and gaudily ornamented now with a string of feminine garments that fluttered from the free running linen line.

Openly in tears, the McCreary girl emptied the second kettle, caught Rufe on the rebound, sent him scuttling and yelling as though he had interfered with a hive of working bald-faced hornets.

Tex Geary, shouldering the witless Calico, clambered up the porch steps. Rover followed him, licking the horse hair off his chops.

The McCreary girl was scolding her brother for so frightening Curly's horse that the latter had torn down the clothes-line and escaped with all her spare fripperies.

"What'll I do?" she sobbed. "Nothing to wear."

Sam patted her on the shoulder with his good hand, awkwardly soothed her, saying that so long as mail-order houses sent out catalogues and he could sell off a few beeves now and then, she could always get more clothes.

"But it ain't often," Sam ended complacently, "that a girl like you gits a chance to dump hot water all over a gent like Rufe Boudett. Jest for that, Sis, I figure to buy you a dozen pair of silk sox an' a bonnet with blue ribbons."

"I'll pick my own bonnet," she said snappily. "And I'll certainly hold you to your promise for more clothing."

Then Tex jogged in, dropped Calico on the clean floor, and announced they had better pack up and quit the place. Rufe had a roundup crew camped down the creek and he would go for reinforcements.

Sam McCreary said stubbornly, "This is our home. Our folks lived here before us. We won't go, will we, Molly?"

So that was her name. Molly. A good old Irish swing to it, Tex reflected. It took a girl like Molly to think of hot kettles in a finish fight.

"If you got any beefsteak," he suggested, "I reckon Rover has now sharpened his teeth enough to take on some grub. And I'm sayin' he deserves steak about as much as Molly has fancy riggin due her."

Molly bent and patted the old dog's head. Rover wagged his tail, wobbled over to a bunk by the stove, crawled under it.

"His master's bunk," said Sam. "He always sleeps there."

"Don't he belong to you?" Tex asked.

"No. We keep him now since Harp got killed."

The name recalled Geary's reason for coming here. He suspected Sam of killing Harp Slagle. And the murdered man's dog had interfered as had Tex to rescue the suspect from range bullying.

Tex walked over to Sam who had barred the door and stood there polishing up a rifle he had taken from a staghorn rack.

"Just why," Tex asked, "was Rufe jumpin' yore hump this mornin'?"

"Because of that danged bobwire fence. Rufe come in here six years ago. A land hog and a bully. Plenty of money to hire men; all of 'em fighters like you."

"Forget me."

"Well, yo're a fighter. Anyway he can hire men like Calico Bill an' Curly. Weaker settlers pulled out when their haystacks and cabins mysteriously caught fire at night. Some men was found layin' dead on the range with bullets through 'em. Then Rufe run that bobwire fence, kept our cattle from reachin' government grass—and the war was on. Not many of us left to fight it out. Only folks like me an' Harp. And Harp did most of the fightin' because," Sam's face turned bitter and he held up his maimed left arm with the steel hook glistening there, "because," he went on dourly, "I wasn't a complete fightin' man."

"You do purty well," growled Tex. "But I'm frank to say I come here with different intentions toward yuh than I got now. I busted jail last night. Or rather was helped out by men I figure I know although they was masked. They advised me to git outa the country. While I hung around to jump you, all this come up."

Sam frowned. "Sizin' up the way you helped me makes me wonder if I didn't jump the gun too quick on you regardin' Harp's murder."

"I figured you did. I got ahead of that even. I'd heard of one pardner killin' another to get the whole outfit."

McCreary's blue eyes blazed. Then he walked over and said earnestly to Tex, "Yuh may not believe me. Yore entitled to that because I didn't believe you. But, stranger—"

"Tex Geary's the name."

"I know that. Anyway, I'm swearin' here and now I had nuthin' to do with killin' Harp."

"How come you found him so quick?"

Sam frowned. "Molly an' me was out riding for cattle. We come back early, found a note pinned to the table with the butcher knife. It was writ in a hand we didn't know tellin' Harp a plan was afoot to cut Boudett's fence. And Harp—always a quick feller to jump at conclusions—had just written below it that he was startin' for the top of the rim."

"What time was that?"

"He musta left here in mid-morning. Say ten o'clock. Molly and I found the note at noon. Harp had been dead for an hour."

Tex frowned. He walked up and down the clean little kitchen. He heard the snoring of the pet dog of the murdered man.

Sam spoke the truth. The Red Bank coroner had testified that Harp had probably died about eleven o'clock.

"And I," Tex said bitterly, facing Sam, "was ten miles away from that fence at eleven o'clock."

"You swore you was huntin' horses. We didn't believe you. The evidence was too strong. There was yore gun in the brush, also later identified from its bullet as the murder weapon. And the tracks of that pinto horse leadin' away from the scene. A hoss you was known to ride."

Tex stood staring intently at Sam. "That note from Harp," he said.

Sam dug it out of a table drawer. Tex studied it and found the writing was vaguely familiar. A strange twist to the way in which the writer formed a "t." That letter of course was familiar to Geary because it was the first of his nick-name. But he wasn't a handwriting expert. If he ran down the killer, he must rely on range evidence, trail sign.

A thought crept into his mind. Range sign. Horse tracks. They had charged him with murder because of the hoofprints of a horse.

"McCreary," he shouted, "and took that startled rancher by both shoulders. "If tracks from a murder scene prove somethin' against me, then hoss tracks should also prove where I was when the killin' took place."

"What do yuh mean?"

Tex Geary's eyes flamed. "No rain's fallin' since that day. You and yore friends can back trail to where I found those strayed hosses. You can check the feet of the pony I rode. You'll find I was really with that runaway bunch instead of ridin' that paint the killer topped."

Sam scratched his forelock with his hook. "By Gosh," he speculated. "That does look reasonable. Molly, come here!" he shouted, and as he waited, he said with a grin, "Molly's quicker on the think than me. Tell her what you just told me."

But Molly didn't appear. The cabin was silent except for Rover's snoring. Sam said slowly, "You asked for a steak for the dog. I'll bet she went down to the spring house by the creek to cut some meat."

"That was a mistake," Tex said with a trace of anxiety. The girl shouldn't have quit the cabin with those dangerous men in the woods. Tex picked up his gun. "I'll go look for her," he said.

"I'm her brother," growled Sam. "That's my right. You stay here. You've done enough for us."

Tex smiled coldly as he moved toward the door. "I don't dare stay here long. Don't forget the Red Bank sheriff is after me. And by now he's probably turned out half yore friends along this crick."

Sam grunted. "And Rufe has probably stirred up all his men within call. This bobwire war is about ready to flame."

He pushed past Tex, opened the door, shouted "Molly."

The girl didn't answer. But from the timber, rifles flamed. Bullets battered into the door as Tex dragged Sam back into the room. Then Tex barred the entrance, flung the wooden bolt into its slots. Sam was limp in his arms for the volley had put a bullet through his right arm. High up but dangerous.

Tex laid Sam out on the floor. Rover crawled from under the bunk, stood whining as Tex cut away Sam's sleeve, used it for a tourniquet to check the flow of blood, then in desperation turned for something he could stuff through the knot and use as a lever to tighten the binding.

On the foot of the bunk lay a pair of wire pliers. Tex thrust the metal handles through the tourniquet, checked the red flow that was draining Sam McCreary's life.

Thunderous blows rained on the doorway. Tex sprang up, seizing his gun. He clicked a shell into the chamber.

Now he could hear the roll of hoofs like drums as men galloped down from the timber.

"In the name of the law!" a voice thundered. He recognized the hoarse

tones of Hemp Tuthill, Red Bank sheriff. "Geary—come out with yore hands in the air!"

Tex curled his lips, vowed he would not surrender, warned the sheriff away from the door. His rifle crashed a bullet through the top as a warning.

Tuthill's boots rattled in a hurried retreat. Tex dashed to a front window. He saw riders circling the shack like warring Indian braves. There wasn't a chance.

And then old Rover began to howl, sitting there beside pale Sam McCreary with nose tilted in the air. A dark pool widened under Sam's body. The tourniquet, not completed because the law had rudely interrupted Tex, had broken.

Tex Geary laughed shortly, patted Rover on the head, said gently. "Old boy—what a sheriff couldn't do, you could."

He stepped to the front door, flung it open, stood with his hands in the air and his rifle at his feet.

"Take me," he offered. "And then take care of Sam. He needs it."

CHAPTER IV
Showdown

SHERIFF TUTHILL, a lank, red-faced man with a huge roan longhorn mustache, held Tex under his gun while two grim possemen dismounted and entered the cabin to aid Sam. A dozen riders remained with the officer, sitting on their mounts behind him, hard eyes riveted on the battered Texan.

"You damn jailbird," rasped Tuthill, "if I wasn't wearin' the star, I'd tell these boys to string you up to a ridge-pole of the barn." His alert gaze took in the wreckage around the house, the flower beds with hoofprints which had crushed down Molly's blossoms, the ruin of the clothes-line, garments scattered here and there across the meadow marking the flight of Curly's horse. Clearly the sheriff blamed Tex Geary for all this.

"Sheriff," Tex drawled, "you an' yore friends never believed me from the start. But when Sam comes too, I reckon you'll find he changed his tune. His sister too."

"Where's the girl?"

"She went down to the springhouse to cut some meat."

The sheriff sent a man to find Molly. Then he holstered his gun, set a guard of two men over Tex, and stalked into the cabin. He came out shortly, vastly puzzled.

"Two men in there," he snapped. "Calico Bill. What's he doin' thar?"

"Prisoner of war," Tex explained, and told of the encounter with Rufe and his followers. The sheriff and his posse were amazed.

"But you worked for Boudett. And we're dang near certain it was Rufe and Calico and Curly that got you outa jail."

"What told you that?"

"We follered hoss tracks outa town. Found the loose hosses where yore rescuers had changed. They all carried Rufe Boudett's brand."

Tex smiled grimly. "When Sam wakes up, he'll also tell yuh somethin' about hoss tracks."

Sam soon recovered, and offered his evidence to back up the Texan's story regarding the trail sign which might establish an alibi for Tex. They brought Sam out from the cabin and he sat on the bench on the bullet-splintered porch while possemen strapped up his wounded right arm.

One man tossed over the wire pliers which Tex had used to save Sam's life. The sheriff examined them curiously. "Such things as these," he growled, "caused this bobwire war. Brought about the killin' of pore Harp."

"Yeah," said Sam. "Them was Harp Slagle's." His eyes wavered then he faced the sheriff squarely. "I'll admit," he went on, "that I was hidin'

somethin' out. When I found Harp I also found his pliers. I thought he had cut that fence. I figured it might ease things up for this Tex Geary who I suspected of the killin'. So I never turned in them pliers. But when the man you suspect uses 'em to save yore damned life, then only a coyote will keep his mouth shut."

Every eye there turned on the pair of pliers that had been involved in the fates of two partners. Even Tex Geary stared. And then he stepped forward, saying hoarsely to Sam.

"These never belonged to yore partner."

"I found 'em beside his body."

Tex pointed down to where the edges of the pliers were dulled and black as though they had been thrust into a fire.

"Before the killin'," he said, "I helped brand out a bunch of colts. We needed somethin' to lift the hot irons from the fire, hot brandin' irons. A man unhooked these from his saddle and I used these same pliers for that work. You can see where they got blackened up in the sagebrush blaze."

"Who was that man?" demanded the sheriff.

"My boss, Rufe Boudett!" replied Tex thinly. "I see it now," he went on. "I was a stranger and—" he grinned coldly, "he took me in. He wanted to start a range war figurin' he could git control of lands that he run settlers off. He built that spite fence and he lured Harp up there because Harp was a fighter and a leader. And he framed me by runnin' off my hosses so I'd be away."

A cold-faced posseman cut in brusquely. "Yo're talkin' big yorself, hombre. You don't expect us to believe that. Why Rufe got you out of jail."

"Yeah—but he figured I'd hit the breeze for Montana. All my life I'd be a suspected killer while he rode free an' took over Blue Rim Basin. But I turned back—"

"Why?" the sheriff asked.

Tex said slowly, "My dad was a Texas Ranger. Somebody used his gun—the one you took at the murder scene—for a dirty killin'. I wanted to clean the record."

From his waistband, the sheriff removed the old gun with the ivory stock. He laid it on the bench beside Sam McCreary. He said slowly to Tex. "After I check on the tracks of these stolen hosses, mebbe I'll give you back that gun. And ask you to help hunt the man who stole it from yore cabin."

Tex Geary was looking across the meadow. He said slowly. "I don't need to hunt that man. *Here he comes now!"*

The posse whirled, stared in dismay as they watched Rufe Boudett riding toward them. He had at his back a dozen men from his crew all carrying rifles across their saddle-forks. Tex knew half the men there—knew that all of them weren't hired killers like Calico and Curly Sparks. But they rode now under orders from their chief.

Rufe halted fifty paces from the silent riders of the law.

"Sheriff," he drawled, "I lost a man here. I come for him. And I also want the renegade that turned against me. That man there—" his trigger finger pointed toward Tex.

"Boudett," retorted the sheriff coldly, "get yore men away from here. Both these men are my prisoners."

Boudett laughed. "Yo're a long ways from Red Bank, Tuthill. And I got two men to yore one. I ask for the last time—"

"Why don't you put it in writin'?" the sheriff sneered. "Like the note you left when you held up my jailer and freed Tex Geary. You wrote then that it wasn't no crime for Tex Geary to kill a nester. I took that letter to yore banker, Boudett, and he recognized yore handwritin."

Boudett laughed. "That ain't expert testimony, sheriff," he said. "No sagebrush jury would believe a line of talk about handwritin'. Yuh better try again."

"Yore hoss tracks from the jail, Boudett. I found the ponies and read the brands."

"You can't prove I rode any of 'em."

Then, swift as a flash, Tex Geary passed the tight line of nesters. He strode across the cleared space. He gripped in his left hand a pair of wire pliers, in his right an old gun with a stained ivory stock.

"Boudett," he said harshly, "it's between you and me. I don't care what happens next. This bobwire war can flare up. But one of us won't hear it. You can laugh at handwritin' and hoss tracks. You could even deny you wrote the note that Slagle found on his table callin' him to the spite fence. But yuh can't deny these are yore pliers for I saw you take 'em off yore saddle the day we branded colts."

He flung the pliers down and every rider in Rufe's outfit looked at them as they lay there on the ground. "Boudett," Tex cried. "You framed me—a pilgrim who had done nuthin' worse than work hard for yore low-down money. You framed me, and thanks be, whether me or you dies within the next split minute, I can stand here and call you." He took one step forward. "Boudett—go for yore gun."

Boudett croaked out to his men. "Shoot the lyin' pilgrim to ribbons! He's a no-good coyote killer."

And as he roared, he went for his gun.

Not a man in the line moved. For from the top of the cabin a girl stood up and she held a shotgun.

"The first man who interferes," Molly cried, "gets a load of buckshot through the brisket. Boudett asked for this, and he should be man enough to play out his string!"

A cold little wind came down from the peaks of the Blue Rim and Rufe Boudett finally knew that he had reached the end of his murderous trail. And he heard behind him the mutter that ran along the ranks of his own cowboys, disgust that they had turned on a comrade who had been framed and thrown in jail. It was not fear of Molly and her gun that restrained them. It was because Tex had asked for a showdown, presented his evidence, and faced a dozen hard men to retrieve his honor.

"Draw," repeated Tex Geary. "Draw —and may God have mercy on you. —For I won't—"

Rufe whirled his horse to present a narrower target, hoping also to block the Texan's line of fire. His right hand snaked toward his holster.

Tex Geary stepped back, just a pace away from the lunging horse. From a point just above his belt, the old ranger gun flashed smoke and lead. And Rufe Boudett, standing up in his stirrups, pounded back an answer. Until something struck him flat and he pitched off his horse and lay there on the green grass with the bridle reins twisted in his nerveless left hand.

Tex Geary swayed, then fell across the body of his enemy.

As they laid Tex in Harp Slagle's bunk, Molly looked up into the concerned faces of the sheriff, the nesters, and even the cowboys of Boudett's own outfit.

"He was a stranger," she said softly. "But *we'll* take him in. No need for Harp's bunk to be empty any more. No need for Rover to lack a master. No need—" she put her arms gently around Geary's neck.

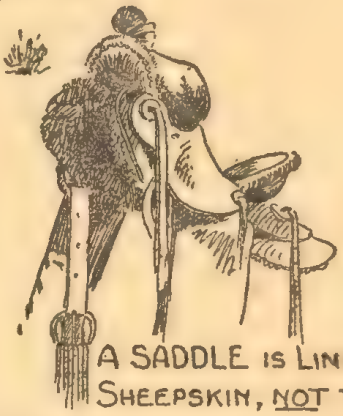
The sheriff turned on his men, including even Sam. "In the name of the law," he said softly, "I order the hull shebang outa here. These two young folks need plenty room for a quiet little talk."

COW COUNTRY SAVVY

By E. W. THISTLETHWAITE

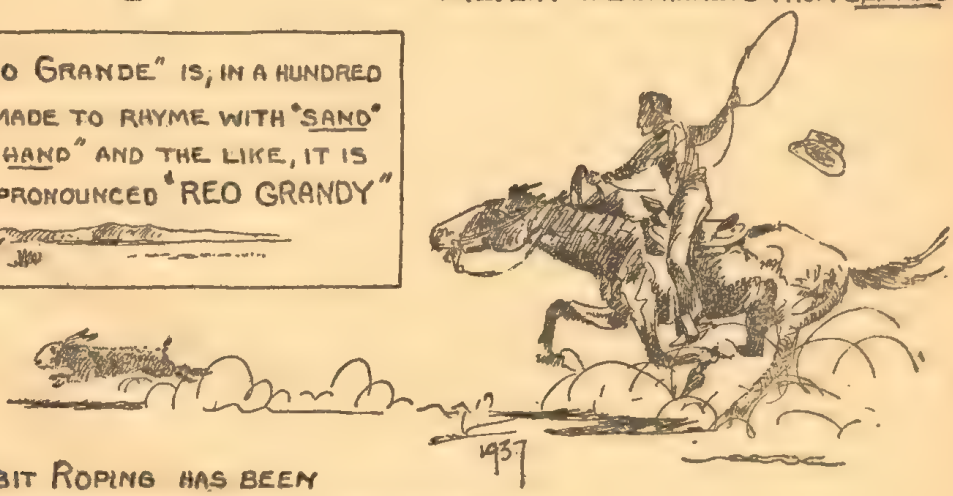
ON SOME RANGES AN ALMOST DAILY JOB — ESPECIALLY DURING WET SUMMERS — IS DOCTORING CATTLE FOR SCREW WORMS

YOU CAN TELL A MOUNTAIN HORSE FROM A PLAINS HORSE BY ITS HOOFS — THE FORMER GROW STRAIGHT, WHILE THE LATTER SPREAD OUT



A SADDLE IS LINED WITH SHEEPSKIN, NOT TO MAKE IT SOFT FOR THE HORSE, BUT TO PREVENT THE BLANKETS FROM SLIPPING

ALTHO "RIO GRANDE" IS, IN A HUNDRED SONGS, MADE TO RHYME WITH "SAND" "OLD COW HAND" AND THE LIKE, IT IS REALLY PRONOUNCED "REO GRANDY"



JACK RABBIT ROPING HAS BEEN FEATURED AT MORE THAN ONE TEXAS RODEO

Mr. Smith Passes

—which isn't usually a smart tinhorn's opening play!

Sun-dodger Smith didn't like his cards—nor the man across the table, either . . .

By

L. L. FOREMAN

MR. SUN-DODGER SMITH scanned his cards and didn't like them. He didn't like the face of the man across the table, either. It was a tough old face, and vaguely suggested something quick and wolfish. The tangled eyebrows looked fierce and hoary; the drooping gray mustaches had a sinister habit of working up and down like a brace of curved daggers toyed by restless hands and the mouth had a dour set to it. Definitely not the face of a good loser.

But it was the man's eyes that Mr. Smith particularly disliked. They were cold, stony, and did not react according to formula, which was irritating as well as disturbing. Mr. Smith's private formula for success depended somewhat upon the psychological power of the human eye. He had trained his own jet black ones to stare without blinking into those of the proposed victim, while his nimble hands did swift and surreptitious things with the cards.

But these pale blue accursed eyes wandered casually from the half-hypnotic trap, shook his nerve with their inhuman lack of feeling, and made him fumble like a greenhorn.

Mr. Smith regretted his pressing invitation to join in a little friendly game. He had not, at the time, foreseen anything like this. The stranger had looked like any other old wandering desert rat with a possible ounce or two of hard-grubbed gold dust.

"Raise you ten," Smith grunted, and fiddled with more chips, hoping the bluff would have its proper effect on the stranger.

The gentleman with the stony eyes silently pushed twenty blue chips into the already sizeable pot. He did it with the blunt fingertip of his left hand, holding his cards palmed close to the table. His right hand reclined in his lap. He had barely glanced down at his cards before opening the play.

Sun-dodger Smith held two pairs—tens and queens—and a deuce. There was another tempting ten-spot in the convenient little pocket under his unbuttoned vest, but it seemed a long way off with those cold blue eyes idly resting on him. Sun-dodger Smith resisted temptation. He knew not what the mustached gentleman held, but that deceptively restful right hand gave him a sense of insecurity. It lay altogether too close to the big battered gun in the sagging old holster.

"Pass," sighed Sun-dodger Smith, and some of the onlookers snickered, knowing his thoughts and anguish.

"Shorthorn," murmured a lank cattleman who had paid too much for the bitter pleasure of Sun-dodger Smith's acquaintance, "Never knew a tinhorn gambler yet that'd take an even chance."

The remark seeped through the noise of the barroom and cut into the ears of Sun-dodger Smith. He looked up, picked out the man who had made it, but said nothing. The cattleman grinned hardily, thumbs hooked in his belt. He did not speak, and Sun-dodger did not care to break the silence.

THE gentleman with the disturbing eyes raked in the pot. "'Nother hand?" he queried. He had a voice that came up out of a barrel and gathered a rusty quality on the way, as though seldom put to use. No inflections broke its flat tone.

Sun-dodger Smith shook his head. He wanted no more. Four losing hands in a row were more than enough. Four times he had built up a pot on the strength of what he could deftly fish out from under his vest. Four times, under the spell of those untrapped eyes and that placidly resting hand, he had balked at the last hefty jump in the pot and passed.

The gray-head repeated his question. "'Nother hand?"

"No," snapped Smith, and fresh irritation mingled with his sorrow. "Can't you hear?"

"You didn't answer the first time." The other's tone remained flat and unruffled. "Yeah, I can hear." Gnarled fingers gathered up the chips, while the steady blue eyes gazed through Sun-dodger Smith. "S'long." The tall figure in shabby garb arose quietly, turned with slow deliberation, and threaded its way off through the crowd.

"Tough, Sun-dodger," remarked an onlooker with scant sympathy. "How much you out?"

"Twelve hundred," grunted Smith. "Who's that hombre an' where's he from, anyway?"

Nobody knew. "Drifted in 'smornin'," volunteered a glass gathering barman. "I've seen him around before. Rode a cow-bait nigh's old as himself. I wouldn't of give two dollars for all his outfit. Sold a gold watch to the boss when he came in. Was broke, reckon. Ain't broke now though, huh?"

HOT sun, dry air, and two hours in the saddle did not improve the mood of Mr. Sun-dodger Smith. He hated exercise and discomfort of hard

saddles. His skin, bleached and softened by shady environments, felt drawn and prickly under the sun's naked heat.

He drew to a halt and sighed thankfully as he stiffly dismounted. This would be a good place. The single line of hoof-tracks bent sharply here around the edge of the rimrock nose, and the tumbled rocks beyond would afford good cover. He went to work.

He worked carefully, but it didn't take long, and much of the time was spent in peering around the rimrock back over the trail. Finished, he surveyed his preparations with critical approval. A rifle poked its wicked round muzzle from between two close-set rocks, with a bit of cloth showing behind it to suggest a flattened man. Another muzzle showed off to its right, just under the crown of an old hat. Both covered the dim trail, one on each side. A rider coming around the bend would find them aimed at him, less than ten yards away.

Sun-dodger Smith led his horse out of sight and left it hitched in an angle farther along the low ridge. He climbed a little way up, breathing hard, to a spot where he could watch the back trail, and pulled out his snub-nosed sleeve-gun. There he settled himself to wait, cursing the heat and the necessity for all this exertion.

It was a long time before the awaited rider showed up, stooped atop his plodding old nag. He came drifting steadily on, dipping and topping the long rises at about the gait of a trotting dog. Bulky packages swung from the latigo strings, but their bumping seemed not to annoy the ancient horse. Like its master, it showed a tired patience and a shambling dignity in keeping with its years.

"Damn old desert rat," muttered Sun-dodger Smith as he lowered his head. He cocked his snub-nosed gun and took another look at the rifles below. They certainly looked convincing. They would do to hold the attention of that old wolf, keep his infernal eyes busy. Mr. Smith did not relish the idea of meeting that chilly gaze again. Might do something to his nerve. But from the back . . . That would be easy enough. Just another old codger.

The nag plodded past the end of the rimrock and turned sharp to its right, coming into full view of the two menacing muzzles. Its rider muttered something, tightened rein, and frowned. His bushy great eyebrows worked up and down. The horse obediently halted, one ear drooping.

Sun-dodger Smith grinned. Silently he arose, cocked gun ready, and stared down.

"Take it easy, old-timer," he drawled. "Lift them paws. You're covered from all—"

THINGS happened very quickly to cut off the rest of his speech. The gaunt old profile jerked around, became full face. Brittle, sun-faded eyes swept up the rocky slant, as their owner left saddle with surprising speed. A gun roared six times. Five bullets smacked rock around Sun-dodger Smith. One didn't. Sun-dodger Smith gasped, shocked with astonishment and a tearing pain. He stumbled, lost footing, and rolled the dozen yards down the sharp slope, his two-shot gun clattering after him.

He was reeling badly and making queer sounds as he ran to his hidden horse. At another time he might have stayed to fight it out with a man who had emptied his gun. But not this time. Those unearthly keen eyes had cut through his last carefully staged bluff, broken his nerve. His confidence would never be the same again, and he knew it.

The man with the big gun stayed crouched behind his nag, listening to the muffled padding of retreating footsteps. When hoofbeats clumped fast in a dying tattoo, he slowly

straightened up and squinted after the dust-clouded shape.

"That Smith hombre," he grunted. "H'm. Dang fool thing to do, that."

He turned his weathered face to the sun, feeling its heat. "H'm." He punched the old nag gently in the ribs. "Plump forgot 'bout this place. You was right, hoss. We turn here."

He mounted and rode slowly on, without a glance at the two propped rifles.

Dusk came on as he jogged into a little camp. The old man bending over the cookfire lifted his grizzled head, surveying him with mingled relief and displeasure.

"Hi, Sam."

"Hi, Jed."

Sam scooped the dripping coffee bag out of the blackened pot. "Where yuh bin?"

"Bisbee." Jed slid to the ground, rubbing his stiff old legs. "Gimme a hand with this stuff, Sam. Grub an' t'baccy."

"Lord knows we need it." Sam lowered his brows. "Whatcha do—sell yer watch? Jed, I tol' yuh—"

"Yeah, I know. Bought it back agin, though." Jed fished it out. "Got chivvied into a draw poker game. Cleaned better'n thousand—"

"Hell!"

"Uh-huh. Played a tinhorn name o' Smith. Bluffed him out o' four straight pots. He warn't a good loser. Let's drift up Tombstone way t'morrer, huh?"

"Suits me. A thousand—phew!" Sam shook his grizzled head. "Here's coffee. Look out—yer spillin' it. Why, yuh ain't got yer specs on!"

"Broke 'em on the way to town. Jolted off an' I stepped on 'em when I got off to look. That's why I wanta go to Tombstone. Got to git me another pair." Jed swore mildly as the hot coffee scalded his hand. "Damn. Feller like me's in a helluva fix without specs. You'll have to watch out fer me till I get 'em, Sam. Can't make out much of anythin' more'n a foot away."

COMING!

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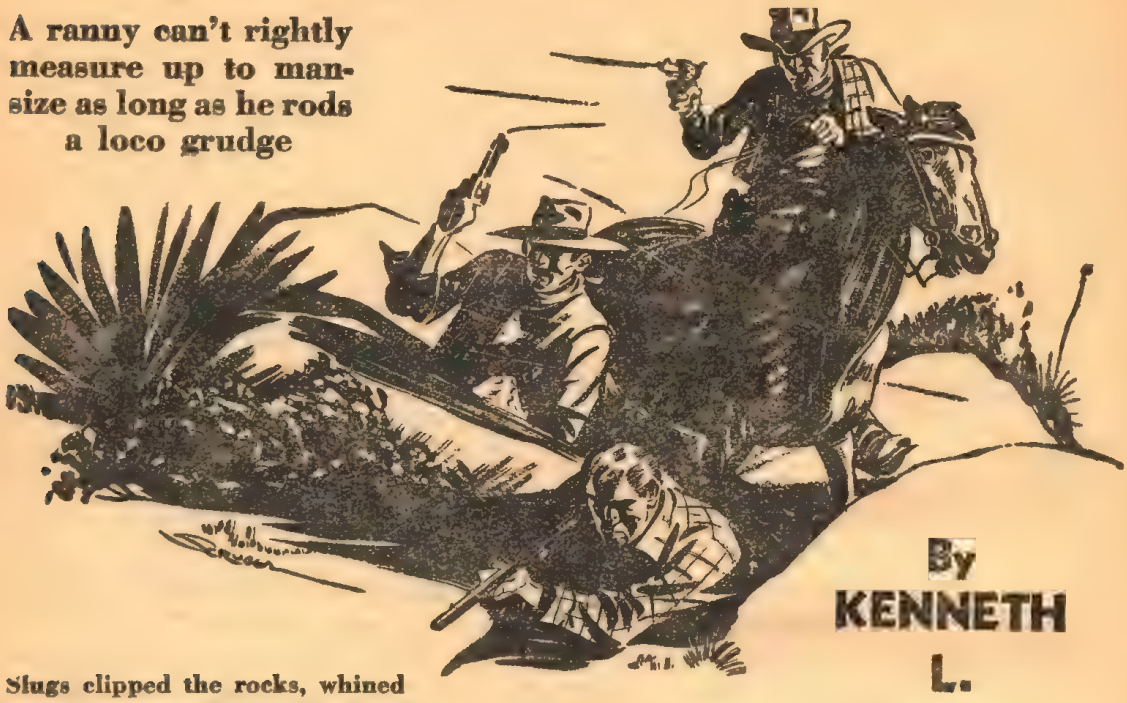
GUNSMOKE SALUTE

A ranny can't rightly measure up to man-size as long as he rods a loco grudge



Slugs clipped the rocks, whined wickedly around Ballard and the Vanes.

By KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

HUGH BALLARD was halfway through the steep-walled gorge of Buzzard's Pass when a furtive stir of movement behind the boulders on his left, warned him that he had gone far enough.

Tense, wary, he halted his bronc. But it was old Makin's Vane who came sidling into view. Bandy-legged and warped and old, Makin's wasn't much to look at—but his faded and watery eyes missed no detail of Ballard's outfit.

Deftly, Makin's glance shifted from the low-slung hoglegs to the forty-dollar Stetson and then to the hand-tooled saddle. The oldster looked at the added breadth which five years of roaming had given to Ballard's shoulders, at the powder-stains on Ballard's hands, the callouses on the balls of the drifter's thumbs.

The story of five years was there. And Makin's read it bit by bit, pulled his seamed face into a lopsided grin, and slowly lowered his rifle. "Hugh," he whined, "Son, you've come back!"

With the sober reluctance of a man who wants to hide his feelings, Ballard dismounted and shook hands with his foster-father.

Then another man came scrambling down the rocks. A youngster, this one, Lorey Vane had been seventeen when Ballard pulled stakes from Lightnin' Gap, and would now be twenty-two. And the inner fire which had made Lorey wild as a mustang then, was still ablaze.

"Hugh!" he whooped excitedly, his eyes bright with hero worship, "By damn, yo're a treat for the eyes!"

"Not so loud, Lorey!" Makin's Vane said plaintively, "Mebbe the J-Bar bunch is comin' right now. Seems to me I hear—"

"Still roddin' yore grudge," said Ballard to the old-timer.

Makin's reared back resentfully. "McKay's bunch never will let me alone," he said. "You know mighty well I got a grievance against them skunks, an' by hell, I'm gonna square the account!"

Ballard looked shrewdly around. "Set to drygulch 'em?"

"Y'know damn' well we got to fight this way—only way we got a chance!" Makin's snarled. "McKay's outfit is bigger'n ever, now. Couple days back, he rode out through here—must of had word you was headin' this way an' figgered you was comin' to help us, an' decided to head yuh off. Which give Lorey an' me a swell chance to hole up here an' give McKay a foretaste of the hell he's goin' to!"

Ballard looked down at his foster-father. Makin's seemed to take it for granted that the drifter had come back to help rod the old grudge. But Makin's was wrong. Ballard had come back to take Lorey Vane away from this war of loco, unreasoning hate before that hate warped the kid to the core.

And how could Ballard tell that, to the only father he had ever known?

He had no chance to tell Makin's anything, now. The clatter of horses' hoofs echoed around the bend of the pass. Makin's snatched up his rifle. Lorey crouched, drew iron, and then watched Ballard out of the corners of his eyes, worshipfully.

Rock McKay, backed by a half dozen J-Bar riders, came jogging around the bend. Instantly, Makin's Vane's harsh shout lashed out at them, "Stop where you're at, damn yuh!"

McKay pulled his coal-black gelding to a halt, held out a hand to stop his sidekicks. While his horse snorted and settled down, the owner of the J-Bar stared hard at Ballard.

"Howdy, Hugh. Had word you was comin'."

"Beats all how news gets around," said Ballard coldly.

McKay's interest hardened. As if vaguely disturbed by Ballard's easy poise, the big man stirred in his saddle. "We tried to head you off, the other side of the pass. But you cover country almighty fast—best we could do was cut your sign. You throwin' in with the Vanes?"

There was a general tightening of wariness among the men who backed McKay. Ballard was facing them with a gunsmoke rep to back him up—and they were afraid of him!

HE said nothing. Muscles knotted under McKay's blue jaw, and finally the J-Bar snapped, "Okay. We savvey where you stand, Hugh. You stand with the coyotes that have poisoned my water-holes, taken pot-shots at my boys from cover. With the sneakin', coyotin' Vanes. You've picked your side, so, from now on, what happens to you is your own damned lookout!"

There was an uncompromising hardness in McKay's manner. Ballard grinned, moved gently forward, swung his tired bronc out of the way. Makin's Vane, his head tipped slightly to one side, his hands clenched around his rifle, was missing none of the details. Young Lorey still was crouched, helping his father cover the J-Bar bunch, his youthful eyes savagely aglow. The will to kill was in both of them.

Hugh Ballard swung his attention back to McKay. "Well, Rock?" he challenged. He knew well that the J-Bar men had too much sense to make a play now. They had been taken off-guard by the Vanes' presence in the pass—and the Vanes had the drop. It would be good for Rock McKay's soul for him to back down, for once . . .

The crash of Makin's rifle came like the thunder of doom. McKay's left arm jerked back, under the impact of the slug. And the man behind McKay let out a pitiful little groan, clutching with twitching, useless fingers at his saddle horn, toppled to the ground.

The J-Bar horses snorted, reared. In the confusion, McKay's men dragged at their guns.

The sound of Makin's second shot was almost lost, under the thundering chorus of those smoke-poles. Another J-Bar rider jerked, cursed, and pitched from his hull.

McKay's smoke-pole was talking now, adding its thunder to those of his remaining four men. Slugs clipped the rocks, whined wickedly in ricochets all around Ballard and the Vanes.

For accurate short-gun work, the range was long—yet the J-Bar bunch made things mighty hot. In simple self-defense, Hugh Ballard made his draw and started firing.

That decided the J-Bar gents, who would all have been dead by now had Makin's aim with that rifle been anything but wavering. Those of them who could, retreated around the bend of the gorge.

Rock McKay's angry shout lifted above the savage, lingering echoes of the gunfire. "Ballard!" he cried, "By hell, we ain't come to the finish of this yet! When we do, I'm seein' to it that you swing along with them sneakin' Vanes, for the murder of Trall Lamont an' Ace Durban! You—"

But one of the downed men was stirring, groaning in the dust.

"Rock! Durban ain't dead," Ballard called. "You can come after him if yuh want."

"Yeah?" McKay retorted suspiciously. "How in hell do I know you an' Makin's ain't figurin' to shoot—"

"You got my word on it, Rock," Ballard said flatly.

McKay edged around the bend, afoot, came apprehensively forward, picked up the wounded man and slung him across massive shoulders. For just an instant he glared at Ballard, then darted back around the bend.

Makin's Vane made a low snarling sound, threw his rifle to his warped shoulder, took wavering aim. Ballard thrust the barrel aside, wrenched the long-gun from the oldster's hands. "You don't shoot men in the back, Makin's!"

The old man cowered. "You ongrateful pup!" he snarled, "I pulled yuh out of a burnin' covered wagon, didn't I, after yore folks was kilt by raiders? I sweat an' slaved, raised yuh just like my own son. I even forgive yuh for runnin' out on us five years ago. Now yuh turn on me!"

Ballard looked at his foster-father. A man to be sorry for, was Makin's. A man who'd been mighty different from this, in the old days before Rock McKay accused him of rustling and backed him up against an adobe wall and riddled him with slugs.

McKay had ridden away, leaving Makin's for dead. But two scared buttons had come out of the brush, had rushed Makin's to Doc Peasley. And by one of those miracles which sometimes are wrought in the furnace of blazing hate, Makin's lived—if you could call it that. The man who had been an up-and-coming rancher became a hopeless cripple, eternally fumbling with the makings of his querleys, whining and snarling and scheming to "get square," while his neglected spread went downhill fast.

McKay had found out, later, that he was wrong in blaming Vane for the wideloopingg. And McKay had done the one thing which his unbending nature would allow—he had apologized. But what did mere words mean to the man who had come back from the threshold of death, whose frame was warped for life, whose mind was twisted by agony?

Makin's could never change now, in his hate. And this was the foster-father to whom Ballard had come back—to take away his son.

"Let's get out of here," Ballard snapped.

"No!" snarled the old rancher. "By damn, this's my chance to nail McKay plumb to the wall—we can crawl over them rocks, get at the J-Bar coyotes from above—"

"We're doin' nothin' of the kind," Ballard retorted. "McKay is carin' for

a dyin' man. We're ridin' to Lightnin' Gap."

Makin's gave Ballard a piercing glance, and a look of satisfaction spread over his wizened face. "Then —yo're throwin' in with us again, Hugh? Well, yuh owe it to us, an' b'sides, yo're in this as deep as us, now. McKay'll blame—"

Distastefully, Ballard reviewed the situation. Pretty slick, Makin's had been, cutting loose with that Remington and forcing Ballard to join."

Oh, things had gone Makin's way. And here was young Lorey, dabbing at a bullet-gash in his temple, and looking at Ballard with faith and confidence in his eyes.

"Damn!" Lorey exclaimed. "Pop, di'ja ever see anything like Hugh's draw? Smooth's silk and fast as greased lightnin'! By hell, with him sidin' us we'll show the J-Bar skunks that we'll be tromped on no more!"

As the foster-brothers helped old Makin's to the rock crevice where the Vanes' horses were hidden, Ballard looked searchingly at Lorey. He saw, in those smoky, bitter eyes, things that he'd been afraid he'd see. Makin's doctrines of hate had fallen upon fertile ground . . .

THE J-Bar bunch made them no trouble, as they mounted and rode out of the pass.

And as Ballard and the Vanes jogged toward Lightnin' Gap, Lorey kept up an enthusiastic chatter. He bragged about Ballard's exploits, word of which had been muchly twisted on the way back to the Gap.

"A rep is easy to get," Ballard told the youngster. "An' almighty hard to get rid of. You hire out as gunhand, in a range war or two. All of a sudden, you've got the rep of bein' a gun-fast hombre—an' some fool throws down on you in a saloon, for no better reason than that he thinks he's faster'n you, an' you got to kill him to save your own hide.

"I ain't no slouch with irons," Lorey boasted. "Maybe you noticed—"

But Ballard wasn't listening. He was thinking about the change in Lorey Vane—and wondering what effect that change had had upon Marge Rand.

And Makin's, whose shrewd, faded eyes missed nothing, spoke up.

"Marge Rand is still in Lightnin' Gap, Hugh. Runnin' that two-bit dress shop, since her maw died."

Ballard looked at Lorey. "Figured you two would be married by now," he said pointedly.

Lorey stared straight ahead—for once he had no answer. And thus the three of them rode into Lightnin' Gap.

Here, there was little change. Men still moved about, different to the powers that ruled the towns—the huge J-Bar outfit.

Folks on the street saw Ballard, lifted startled eyes in recognition, and then quickly suppressed all signs of interest when they saw that he was riding with the Vanes.

Ballard spoke to Makin's. "You an' Lorey hit for yore spread. Better put some peroxide on his head, there where he's gashed. I hanker to see some folks. Be along later."

The oldster twisted around in his saddle, suspiciously. "How do I know yuh ain't gonna cross us?"

"You don't," and giving Makin's no chance for further protest, Ballard swung aside, halted his bronc at the hitch-rack in front of the sheriff's office, dismounted, and went in.

Doc Peasley looked up from his cluttered desk. His jaw sagged and his little eyes went wide as glad surprise pulled him to his feet. "Hugh!" the little pot-bellied sheriff wheezed. "By damn, man, it's good to see—" Then the little doctor who had packed Lightnin' Gap's star for so many years caught sight of the Vanes, out in the street. Resentment seemed to grip him. "I—I—" he fidgeted.

Ballard smiled indulgently. He had been a long time away, was starved for

sight of his old friends. "Never mind, Doc. We just tangled with McKay, up in the pass. I judge there'll be some doctorin' work to be done on Ace Durban. He's bad shot up."

The sheriff swore. "Hell, Hugh, won't you ever learn that they's other ways of settlin' things, besides gunsmoke? What happened?"

Ballard explained, omitting nothing. Peasley might be a man overruled by prudence, but he was a man one could trust to the finish.

"Wonder you wasn't all three killed," the doctor said, when Ballard had finished. "McKay's been a patient man, in the face of Makin's crazy houndin'. But the Vanes have drove him too far. A pity you ever came back, Hugh."

"McKay's bunch was too far away for their short-guns to register," Ballard explained. "An' I came back to Lightnin' Gap to see if I can pull Lorey out of this."

Peasley shook his head violently. "You're a fool, Hugh. The youngster has gone plumb to the bad."

Ballard, who had noticed the sulky down-turn of the kid's mouth, asked, "How so, Doc?" very softly.

"How does any man go bad?" retorted Peasley. "By hatin' the world, by takin' to guns! By gettin' his sights warped, imitatin' a man he worships. Hell, Hugh, every time word of one of your scrapes drifted back here, Lorey —I'm sorry, Hugh—I'm yore friend— an' here I'm makin' you out a downright bad example."

That cut, deeply. Peasley had such a precise way of stating things that even that half-hearted apology didn't alter the fact that the doc was dead right.

AND then, suddenly, Marge Rand was in the doorway, cool and lovely. Ballard, pulling his expensive sombrero from his head, moved toward her.

Peasley was protesting, "Hugh, what'm I to do? McKay'll demand what he would have demanded a long time ago, was he anybody else but Rock—that I jail Makin's. An' you know as well as I do that Makin's will never be taken alive—"

Ballard had no answer for that. Marge Rand held out her hand to the cowboy and they greeted each other, man-to-man style as it must forever be between them. Then they were out on the walk, strolling along the street, rich with memories of yesterday.

The Vanes were gone. And Ballard, stalking along beside the girl, felt a stir of sudden, dark anger when he saw the drawn and tense lines in her face.

"Hoped to find things different," he stated bluntly. "You an' Lorey should have left this town."

"Please, Hugh!" Her grip on his arm tightened. "Lorey never will leave —each day, he gets more like his father. More bitter, more sulky."

Ballard looked quickly at the girl. "And you," he said, almost in a whisper, "You've changed?"

She saw the stir of hope in his eyes. "No, Hugh," she whispered. "I loved Lorey when we were both kids. I love him all the more now—I can't help it. It's been hell, Hugh—"

The crashing sound of gunfire cut off her words. It lifted its ugly song in a swift frenzy, gave way to a chorus of excited yells.

Ballard wheeled, saw Doc Peasley come darting out of the sheriff's office, strapping a gunbelt about his paunch. Leaving Marge Rand, Hugh hurried toward the sheriff.

Grim understanding between them, the pair raced to a corner, looked down the side street. There was a buckboard there, its lathered, spooked-up team rearing and cramping one front wheel under the box. The driver was slumped over in his seat, his mouth drooling crimson froth. In the back of the wagon, Ace Durban was stirring helplessly on some straw. And nearby, under a lazy layer of gunsmoke. Rock McKay was holding his

smoke-pole loosely in his hand as he yanked his coal-black gelding around and around.

"Get back!" Peasley wheezed to Hugh Ballard. "For God's sake get back! McKay'll go crazy on the prod now, sure!"

The little sheriff went waddling excitedly toward the buckboard. Hugh Ballard turned back, just as McKay lifted an enraged yell.

"Peasley! Them damn' Vanes jumped us in the pass! Hugh Ballard's back, throwin' in with 'em. Just now one of 'em fired on us from up there on the feed-store roof and killed Paul!"

Ballard listened to no more of it. Two riders came spurting out from the narrow space between two buildings, into the main street. Makin's and Lorey Vane.

Ballard wheeled, darted to his horse, mounted and went hammering after them.

A MILE out of town, he caught up with them. Makin's had lost his battered hat, and his thin wind blown shock of white hair made his eyes seem wilder than ever.

"Why in hell'd you do that?" Ballard demanded.

"Got another damn' J-Bar coyote, didn' we?" Makin's retorted. "While you was palaverin' with yore friend Peasley! If McKay's damn' bronc hadn' reared up, it'd been him—" Makin's turned his malignant, untrusting eyes full upon Ballard. "What in hell was yuh cookin' up with Peasley?"

"Makes no never mind, now," Ballard said, twisting in his saddle to look back toward town.

And he saw what he expected to see. McKay's bunch, stringing out from town, raising a plume of white dust as they hammered the Vanes' trail.

"You stirred up a nest of yellowjackets, for sure," Ballard snapped, to Makin's. "If we hit yore spread ahead of them, we're some lucky!"

It wasn't quite that close, but it was plenty tight. Slugs were whistling past the three when they pounded down the long slope and brought their tuckered broncs to a halt in the ranch yard.

The Vane spread had gone plumb to ruin, in the years Hugh Ballard had been gone.

Lorey Vane and Ballard helped Makin's into the log house. Here in the untidy gloom Hugh Ballard kicked the door shut, yanked the big oak latch-beam into place.

Outside, the McKay bunch was dismounting, letting loose a chorus of wild, blood hungry yells. Makin's Vane and Lorey poked rifles through slots in the cabin's walls, fired eagerly. Their shots drew a scream of pain from a wounded man, and through the ugly echoes, Rock McKay's voice lifted up. "Get to cover, you fools!" he bellowed. "We can afford to take our time! Peasley, take a couple men, go get that wagon an' load it with straw. You know what to do with it!"

Makin's Vane's seamed face turned, peered through the gloom.

"Yuh hear that, Hugh?" the old man said huskily. "They're figurin' to set that wagon afire, roll 'er down the hill against the house, burn us out!"

"What the hell you expect?" demanded Ballard, and in an instant was sorry he spoke to the oldster harshly. "Makin's, have you gone loco, since the minute you seen me in the Pass? How much do you expect McKay to stand?"

Makin's snarled, but said nothing. And Ballard, realizing that festering hate had rooted too deeply into the oldster's soul for him ever to think straight again, gave up that line of talk.

"I want to know one thing," he stated, his voice flinty hard. "Which one of you two fired from the top of the feed store?"

"I done it," Lorey Vane said promptly.

Ballard swung his cold, penetrating

gaze upon the kid, and Lorey's chin lifted, defiant and sulkily proud. Ballard's face was bitter as he turned away.

Something struck the cabin, with a dull impact that rattled pans and shook down the dust of years from the pole rafters. Makin's Vane had painted the windows black on the inside, so they wouldn't make targets for his enemies at night, but a pane was cracked, and through it, a malignant red glow showed.

"Hugh?" Makin's husked querulously. "Hugh, what're we gonna do?"

Ballard looked at the only father he ever had known. Many a time, at night, Lorey and himself had lain awake, listening to the old man groan and twist under the pain which racked that bent and bullet-twisted body. Yes, a man could pity Makin's—and maybe understand him too . . .

There wasn't a heap that Ballard could do about it. He could turn his guns on the Vanes, march them out to Rock McKay. And Marge Rand might some day come to Ballard's side. But she wouldn't really forget. And neither would he . . .

HE looked up at the roof, saw that the tinder-dry shakes were burning through at one corner, where the blazing wagon had struck. "We'll have to get out of here. McKay's got us plumb corraled, but maybe we could make it to the broncs," he said finally.

"We never could!" Makin's choked. "Besides, the broncs is clean tuckered—an' a hell of a chance we'd have, to saddle fresh ones!"

"Either we choke an' fry here, or we go out with our hands up," Ballard said grimly.

"McKay's gents have got rifles now—an' they're behind cover where we'll never pry 'em loose before they get us. What'll it be?"

Makin's snuggled his seamed cheek against his rifle, fired uselessly into the ominous silence of the yard.

That shot roused only a derisive, hooting yell. The fire was eating swiftly through the cedar shakes of the cabin's roof.

"They're waitin' for us, out there," Ballard said grimly.

Lorey Vane, driven back from his rifle-slot by the heat, wiped sweat and cinders from his face, turned to Ballard. "What the hell's the matter with you, Hugh? You ain't fired a shot! I sure don't savvey you!"

"I'm waiting for you to realize that you're out on a limb," Ballard said gently. "I came back to Lightnin' Gap, Lorey, hopin' for just one thing—that I could make you see how downright damn' useless it is to throw away yore life for the hate of any man. A ranny can't ever rightly measure up to mansize, long as he rods a loco grudge, keeps hellin' around with guns."

"Yeah?" retorted Lorey, with the savagery of a man unsure of his own convictions and seeking to bluff himself into thinking he is right. "Mebbyso you came back because yo're still sweet on Marge! An' yo're a hell of a number to stand there an' preach.

"I should know," Ballard said bitterly. "I'm askin' you, Lorey, to go out of here with me, hands high an' empty. McKay'll listen to reason, even now."

"Sneak out like a damn' whipped coyote?" Lorey demanded. "Why, before—"

But old Makin's, his face twisted by fury, came hobbling forward, flung his twisted body between the two younger men. "Hugh—yuh'd turn my own son against me, yuh filthy lowdown critter! Minute I seen yuh head into Peasley's I knowed yuh was crossin' us!"

"You're wrong, Dad," Ballard said as gently as he could. "I was just tryin' to hammer some sense into Lorey's head. Seems like I'm too late."

"Yuh sure are!" Lorey flung out. "I'm stickin' with Pop, every damn' inch of the way to hell!"

"That's just about where we'll finish," Ballard stated. "Tough on

Marge, it'll be, losin' you after waitin' all these years."

That struck deep and Ballard saw Lorey wince and go white.

With an ugly, rending sound, the heavy roof-peak beam started to buckle. Flaming bits of cedar shakes cascaded down upon the three men.

"We gotta—get out of here," old Makin's gasped.

"Well, we're goin' a-shootin'!" Lorey Vane said hotly.

MCKAY flung a shout down at them, the moment they broke from the cabin. "Drop yo're guns!"

Old Makin's Vane, supported between Lorey and Hugh, pulled back to a halt, peered up the slope. His wrinkled old hands were clenched about his rifle—but he did not raise the weapon.

And at last Rock McKay, his left arm rudely bandaged, rose boldly into view from behind the salt-lick box half-way up the slope.

"Damn yuh, I said—"

Instantly, with a twitching motion, Makin's Vane lifted his rifle, fired.

And missed—

But the shot drew a bellow of wrath from Rock McKay. The big J-Bar owner came striding down the slope, his face grim and bleak under the brim of his black J. B., his smoke-pole held ready, but silent. He was not within short-gun range yet.

Makin's screeched a curse, tore free of Hugh and Lorey, hunkered down so that he could rest his rifle on his knee.

One of McKay's men, behind the pole corral, cut loose with the rifle he'd picked up in town. His slug cut off Lorey Vane's wild, fighting yell, drove the kid backward, sent him to the ground.

Bleak-faced, Ballard swung, looked anxiously at Lorey who was staggering stubbornly to his feet, firing at McKay.

His aim was better than his father's. His slug stopped Rock McKay in mid-stride, buckled the big man in the middle. But even as he went down McKay hammered out two steady, deliberate shots.

Both of them struck Makin's Vane's bent, pitiful body.

McKay's men, who probably had been ordered to keep under cover and take care of their hides while he settled his own quarrel with the Vanes, loosed a roar of anger, a converging thunder of guns.

No man could live, in this. And Lorey Vane was tugging hysterically at his father's body.

Ballard darted to the kid, hurled him into the shelter of a rotting bale of hay. As he did so, Ballard felt two slugs tear at his body, in quick succession. Gasping, gritting his teeth, he dropped down beside the kid.

"Pop—I reckon he's dead, Hugh!"

WITH that swift, unerring ease which a man attains by matching his draw repeatedly against death, Ballard flicked his heavy smoke-poles from leather. "It's for the best, Lorey," he said gently. "Now look here—you dog it out. Grab a horse, ride like hell. I'll keep those J-Bar hombres so busy they can't stop you."

The kid reared back. "I'm stickin' by Pop! An' besides, yo're shot up—"

Ballard's narrowed eyes caught a flicker of movement, up there on the ridge. A slender figure was outlined against the sky—Marge Rand, with a couple of fresh horses!

The drifter clamped his fingers on the kid's arm, spoke through taut, white lips. "Get goin', damn you Lorey! You're some shot up yo'reself—get to a doctor as soon as you can. Marge's up there, waitin'. Circle around to her, savvey? An' don't worry about me. It ain't my blood these gents are howlin' for. Peasley'll hold 'em back, an' he'll patch me up too. I reckon Marge'll forgive you, for killin' McKay—it was next thing to self-defense. An' I'll—take care of dad, Lorey."

The kid choked up, groped for Bal-

lard's hand. "Reckon I judged yuh wrong, Hugh. Some day I'll be half the man you are."

"Goodby, kid," Ballard said gently. "Tell Marge that—for me . . ."

Then the kid was scuttling away. And Ballard was crouching behind two thundering smoke-poles, making things so hot for the Lightnin' Gap bunch that they couldn't stir.

When at last his shells were gone, he stood up, hands in the air and empty.

Peasley, backed by the rest of them, came waddling down the slope. "Damn you, Hugh! I ought to—shake your hand, by damn! Hugh—you're shot up?"

Ballard swayed, but his grin was hard, insolent.

"Sure," he told the rotund sheriff. "McKay's dead?"

Peasley nodded vigorously. "An' a hell of a chance I've got now, of catching Lorey an' that girl. Hugh, you're seven kinds of a fool, throwin' yourself away so that wild one can ride off with Marge Rand. He'll never amount to a whoop in hell!"

But Ballard was thinking that the miracle of a woman's tenderness can erase a lot of scars from a man's life. "The kid'll pan out all man, Doc," he said. "It was Makin's done the shootin' in town—must have made Lorey boost him up onto that feed store roof. Not Lorey's way, to drygulch. An' when I asked 'em who done it, the kid lied, said it was him. But hell, if it had been, he sure wouldn't have shot at McKay, an' hit Paul Trent! Takes a man to lie, sometimes, Doc."

Peasley snorted. "Well," he said loudly, "I'm takin' you into custody, damn yore hide! I'll patch you up in the jail!" And then he added, in a whisper, "An' I'll patch the jail after you make your getaway!"

Ballard grinned—a drifter learns to take things in his stride. Even when he makes what the fancy-talk hombres would call a gunsmoke salute, to a love that he has lost . . .

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RUSTY IRONS—

A Novelette By BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER I
Shoot To Kill!

LEE IRONS, having washed his hands and face and so removed the dust of recent travel, ran a comb through the russet thatch of hair which had won for him his nickname of Rusty, and went to the bed to sit down. There was a rock in his boot, a small stone without a doubt, but one that did not feel small. Indeed as far as Mr. Irons could tell, a large section of the Chiricahua mountains was at the moment prodding a peak into the sole of his right foot.

Lee liked his boots to fit close and the heat of Arizona had added to that closeness. Sitting on the sagging bed, pulling at the heel and toe of the boot, Lee had, through his opened door, a view through the corridor to the door immediately opposite. Looking up from his struggle with the boot, Irons was surprised to find that the door across the hotel corridor had swung open. And the things he saw in the room held him spellbound.

In the room across the hall a blond-haired boy, hatless and tense, poised, dropped into a crouch, and swung his right hand and forearm in an arc. The hand cuffed against the leather of a holster, lifted a gun smoothly from the sheath, and Lee could hear the sharp, *"cuck . . . cuck . . . cuck . . ."* of the hammer of the single action as it came back. Opposite the blond-haired boy another youngster matched him move for move, sweep of hand,

LONG RIDER

Two thousand dollars C.O.D. was the price on Rusty Irons' head — but only Rusty, himself, had the nerve or gun-skill to collect that reward!

slap against leather, rise of steel-tipped arm. Lee Irons leaned forward to better his view.

The blond boy held his weapon poised for an instant and then lowered it. As he did so Irons grinned. That was a good way to practice a draw, all right, a very good way, standing before a mirror. The blond boy's opponent was really only his reflection.

Lee Irons suddenly moved.

In the room across the hall the blond boy had raised the weapon once again, but had placed the muzzle against his temple. His finger was tense on the trigger.

"Hey!" yelled Lee Irons, and surprisingly, his own gun was in his hand. "Hey! drop that!"

Limping, because of the pebble and because his boot was partially removed, Irons hurried out into the

hall. The blond boy was poised, half way between life and death as it were, and from the hall Lee yelled to him harshly.

"Put down that gun! Put it down or I'll let the daylight through you!"

Surprised, the blond youngster lowered the weapon. Lee Irons was advancing, his .45 held menacingly. Neither realized the incongruity of the threat that had stopped the proceedings. The blond boy was plainly frightened of the Colt Irons held. At the door of the room Irons paused in his limping advance. Regarding the blond boy with cynical, greenish eyes, he lowered his weapon.

"Jus' because you ain't the fastest man in the world on the draw is no reason to blow yore head off," stated Lee. "I could show you some, I reckon. Yuh want to cock yore gun *when* you pull it, not *after* yuh pull it. See here!"

Lee slipped the stubby .45 back into its holster. He paused a moment and then in a smooth blend of motion he flashed out the gun, cocked and ready. "See?" questioned Lee Irons.

The blond boy saw. His eyes were wide as he looked at his visitor, and his face was so pale that the freckles stood out like brown splotches.

He glanced down at his own gun again and half raised it.

"Don't yuh!" warned Lee, sharply. "Don't you now!" He moved ahead another hobbling step and took away the boy's gun in one square hand before the youngster knew what had happened. Then he lowered the hammer, took two more limping steps and set down on the bed. "A hell of a note," complained Lee. "A man cain't pull off a boot without stoppin' a suicide. What's the big idea?"

"WHAT right you got buttin' in?" the boy suddenly demanded. "By God, you cain't stop me! You . . ."

"I did stop you, didn't I?" Lee lifted rusty red eyebrows and stared quizzically at the youngster. "What you want to shoot yorese'f for?"

"It's none of your business!" The blond lad was wrathy.

"Nice way to look at it," grunted Lee. "Here I saved yore life. Damn near had to shoot you to do it. What's yore name?"

Surprised, the lad answered the question. "Bob Story. Who are you?"

"Lee Irons," stated Lee. "Look-a-here, Story, there's damn' few things a man can fix after he's dead. You tell me what's the matter. Mebbe we can fix it."

"There's nothin' you can fix." Bob Story was sullen. "Give me back my gun an'—"

"Nope," Lee said cheerfully. "Not 'til I know what you want it for an' what's the matter. Yuh might hurt yorese'f with it."

"I meant to kill myself," Story stated bitterly. "Everybody'd be better off if I did. Lois an'—"

"A woman, huh?" interrupted Lee Irons. "Boy, if you got a girl you don't need no gun to get into trouble with. She'll be enough."

"You don't know what you're talkin' about!" Bob Story spoke hotly. "Lois is . . . she . . . damn it! I love her!"

"An' you was goin' to show her how much you thought of her by shootin' off the top of yore head." Lee's voice was ironic.

"You don't understand," Story blurted desperately. "You . . ."

"But you could tell me," suggested Lee.

"I'm no good." Bob Story's voice was despondent. "I lost the money. I . . . Give me my gun an' get out of here."

"Money trouble an' woman trouble," mused Lee. "Both of 'em bad, but when you put 'em together . . . What money did you lose?"

"The money I got for Old John's horses," Story blurted. "Lois' dad left me some horses to sell for him. I sold 'em an' last night I got in a game an'

lost the money." Bob Story scarcely stopped to breathe. "But John's got to have it. He owes Valverde for the land he's bought an' if he don't pay off, Valverde'll take it back an' John won't have no water for his stock."

"Now wait." Lee scratched his rusty thatch. "Le'me get this straight: You had some horses to sell for this John . . .?"

"For John Culom." There was a dejected nod of the blond head.

"An' John Culom is yore girl's daddy an' you love her so much you was goin' to fix it all up by shootin' yorese'f." Lee Irons' green eyes searched Bob Story's face. "That was a nice way out," he finished, ". . . for you."

Bob Story's face flushed red. He was a good looking boy, Bob Story. Tanned, clean, his face unlined and strong enough save perhaps for a slight weakness in the jaw. "You . . ." he began.

THERE were steps coming along the corridor, the sharp, quick tapping of high heels. Both men were silent. A girl appeared in the doorway, a petite, dark-haired girl, brown eyes smiling, faint roses showing under the olive of her cheeks. "Bob . . ." she said and then, seeing Lee Irons, ". . . Oh! I didn't know you were busy."

Bob Story scrambled to his feet. Lee Irons got up, painfully conscious of that part of the Chiricahuas that was digging into the sole of his foot.

"I can't talk to you right now, Lois," said Bob Story.

The girl included them both with her smile, and jumped to conclusions. "Is this the horse buyer that was coming in?" she asked. And then, not waiting for an answer, "I just wanted to tell you that Dad will be in tonight. We'll expect you after supper, Bob."

"I won't keep him, Miss," said Lee Irons. "He'll be there, sure."

"Don't forget, Bob." The girl smiled at the youngster. "Dad will want to talk to you and I want to see you. I'll go now. I know you are busy."

Before either of the men could speak she had turned and her heels tapped once more in the corridor, the light steps diminishing now.

"An' that was the girl?" said Lee Irons, sinking back on the bed. "Suppose she'd walked in here an' found you like you'd planned?"

Bob Story groaned.

There was silence for a moment and then Irons spoke again. "You was tryin' yore draw," he said slowly. "I reckon to see if you was fast enough to go up against the men who'd won yore money. That it?"

Wordlessly, Bob Story nodded.

"An' you wasn't fast enough," continued Irons. "Then you figured that you'd just step out an' let the old man an' the girl worry. You ain't much man, Son."

Story's face flushed but he took the announcement without comment. Lee Irons tapped the floor musingly with his foot. The rock reminded him of its presence and he quit tapping. "Who won yore money?" he asked sharply.

"Pax Benteen an' Fox Muller," answered Story, his voice subdued. "Muller's the deputy here in Yucca. He—"

Irons appeared surprised. "Did he know you was playin' money that wasn't yores?"

The blond head nodded dumbly and Irons made a little clicking sound of surprise, tongue against his teeth.

"I thought that I'd try to get it back," said Story, slowly. "I tried to borrow it from Fox but he wouldn't loan it to me."

"How much was there?" Irons asked.

"Eight hundred dollars."

"Na'chully he wouldn't loan it." Irons got up. "Well, I got to get this rock out of my boot." He limped toward the door.

"Give me back my gun," requested Bob Story. "I won't . . . I'll promise you I won't do what I started to.

"Nope," interrupted Irons. "No gun. Not yet."

"But what am I going to do?" There was desperation in Bob's voice.

"Set here 'til I get this rock out. Then we'll go have some supper together."

"But I've got to try to get that money for John. I've got to."

Lee Irons paused at the door. "Son," he said softly, "you practically got it. Yo're lookin' at a man that's worth money, plenty of it, an' on the hoof. You set here an' I'll be back."

CHAPTER II
Money on the Hoof

HALF an hour later, sitting at the supper table with steak and potatoes inside him and a cigarette in his hand, Lee regarded Bob Story with questioning eyes. Bob had scarcely eaten a bite. He had played with his food, swallowed a little coffee, and smoked a cigarette, and that was all.

"I told you," said Lee, petulantly, "that you'd get that cash you need, didn't I? Why don't you eat? Think I'm a liar?"

Bob shook his head and listlessly stirred the potatoes and gravy on his plate with his fork. "You got no call to help me out," said Bob. "I can't pay you back. I went into the thing with my eyes open an' I ain't a kid. I can take my medicine."

"Yeah," said Lee. "How come you to gamble anyhow? Ain't you got more sense than that?"

"I needed the money," Bob answered listlessly. "Why does anybody gamble? If I had some money Lois an' me could get married. If I don't have any—we can't. I reckon that's the answer."

Lee Irons grunted and got up from the table. "I'll pay my bill," he announced, "an' then you an' me are goin' to take a pasear around yore jailhouse here. I want to look it over."

Story's eyebrows shot up in surprise, but he, too, got to his feet. Lee paid for the meal and the two left the little frame hotel's dining room.

The sun was low when they reached the street but there was still heat in the air. A man moved listlessly, crossing the dusty road to the Occidental Saloon, and the boards of the sidewalk rang hollowly under the boots of the two companions as they walked along under the tin awning that fronted the hotel.

"Arizona," mused Lee Irons. "Why in hell does a man stay in Arizona when it's hot as this? You could get out, kid. Why don't you?"

Bob Story shrugged. "I've lived around Yucca all my life," he answered. "I reckon I don't know no better than to stay."

"Heat kind of agrees with me," Lee Irons explained his own tarrying in the hot country. "Cold makes my corns hurt. Is that the jail, kid?"

He was looking at a little, square adobe building, the back windows of which were graced by bars.

"That's it," agreed Bob. "Fox has got his office in the front. Sleeps there too. That's where him and Paz an' me played cards."

"Right in the jail, huh?" Lee was still staring at the building. "Well . . . Express Office across the street, an' the stage stop. Handy, I'd say. A man comes in on the stage an' he can land right in jail."

"Paz Benteen is the Express Agent." Bob made no comment on Lee's suggestion. "Him an' Fox are pretty close together."

"I'd judge so." Lee Irons' voice was brisk. "Express Office on one side of the street, jail on the other, an' the agent an' the deputy sheriff workin' hand in glove. Good layout. Well, let's go to the livery. I want my horse."

"You leavin' town?" Bob looked sharply at his companion. "I thought you was . . . Or was that just talk?"

"I never help anybody before eight o'clock," returned Lee Irons. "You got a while to wait yet. Let's go to the livery."

LISTLESSLY Bob Story walked on down the street beside the chunky red-haired man. At the livery barn the two stopped and there Lee indulged in conversation with the hostler, commenting on the weather, the roads, and other sundries. Presently he asked for his horse and went into the tack room for his saddle while the hostler brought the animal from a stall. The horse was a big roan, about as homely an animal as Bob Story had ever seen, but Lee pointed to him with pride.

"Ain't often you see a horse like Bud, here," he commented as he placed his blanket on the roan's back. "Bud's got sense, ain't you, Bud?"

The roan swung his hammer head to brush a fly from a shoulder and completed the motion by snapping big yellow teeth at Lee's shoulder. Deftly Lee avoided the teeth and jambed a knee into Bud's ribs in retaliation.

"Bud don't mean nothin' by tryin' to bite," Irons explained to Bob Story. "He's just got the habit of it, that's all."

Having saddled and paid the hostler for the feed given the roan, Lee left the stable. Bob accompanied him and the two walked back to the hotel where, after a visit to his room from which he returned carrying two saddle bags, Lee paid his bill to the fat and sweating proprietor.

Out in the street again Lee stood and looked at Bud. Bud was by the hotel's hitch rail. He had rubbed off his split ear bridle on the rail where it hung limply, but the horse was standing as though still tied. "Bud," chided Lee Irons, "yo're goin' too far with this."

Bud flicked an inattentive ear.

"You're all ready to go," said Bob Story. "Why don't you pull out?" There was bitterness in his voice.

"Because I ain't ready to," Lee returned, slinging the saddle bags behind the low-cantled roper's saddle on Bud's back. "I ain't got you out of yore jackpot yet."

Bob Story grunted. At first he had held high hopes that this rusty-haired stranger would help him. Now he believed that Lee Irons was just a tramp puncher who, perhaps fortunately, perhaps not, had interrupted him in the hotel. There was a hopeless expression in Bob's eyes and there was hopelessness in his mind. He had played the fool, was still playing the fool. He would go back to the hotel and do the thing that this red-haired man had interrupted.

"Look," said Irons briskly, "I told you that I was money on the hoof. I am. You ever hear of Rusty Irons?"

Bob's eyes widened. He looked sharply at his questioner.

"That's me," Lee explained complacently. "Rusty Irons. I reckon I got my picture or description in every sheriff's office in Arizona."

The boast was not without foundation. Rusty Irons was wanted for holding up the Bisbee-Tombstone stage. He was wanted for holding up a poker game in the thriving little town of Tombstone. There was requests for his presence in Phoenix and in Tucson, requests that were backed with cash. "I'm wanted about two-thousand dollars' worth," Irons said with pride. "It's kind of a mistake, but that ain't goin' to bother us none."

"What do you mean?" snapped Bob Story.

"Well," explained Lee Irons, "I'm on my way to New Mexico but I ain't above layin' over a day to help you out. Supposin' you was to take me in; would you get the rewards?"

"Why . . . sure." Bob Story was

puzzled. "But I can't take you in. I seen you draw an' . . ."

"Shucks," Irons waved that fact away. "I was just playin' then. I wasn't out for business. I can draw faster'n that."

Story ignored that last and asked, "Are you thinkin' that I'd take you in an' get the rewards?"

"Just so." Lee Irons nodded his satisfaction at the fact that Bob had caught his idea. "That's what I figured on."

"Why . . . why, they'd put you in the pen." Bob Story could not believe his ears. "They'd hang you. There was a man killed in Tombstone when you held up the Oriental there. They'd . . ."

"These fellows don't sabe me." Lee spoke with sadness. "Natchully I shot that fool in the Oriental. He had it comin'. Him an' me had been pardners in a little dry placer claim an' we'd took out some dust, an' he stole it. When he seen me he tried to throw down on me an' I had to shoot. I just taken what was in the game at the time because I figured he'd lost it, an' when I heard that there was a gold shipment goin' out on the stage to Bisbee I stepped in an' taken that, too. That thievin' skunk of a pardner had shipped what he'd stole. I sent the cash from the game back to the mayor in Tombstone when I found out it wasn't mine."

Bob continued to stand motionless, looking his amazement at the rusty-haired man. Lee Irons shrugged impatiently. "I always aim to do what's right," he said. "What's mine is mine an' I'll take it, but what belongs to the other gent I'll let alone. If the Wells Fargo people just savvied that, they wouldn't have this reward out for me."

"But—" Bob Story began, "but what did you do with the dust you took from the stage? You . . ."

"Why, I shipped it by express." Lee looked his surprise. "I shipped part of it to the folks of that fellow I had to shoot, an' the rest I sent to myself over in Silver City. I'm goin' to go over there an' get it an' invest in a little ranch. This minin' game's too tough for me. There's too many crooked men in it. I belong with cattle. Now you take that pardner of mine: What did he want to go steal from me for?" There was aggrievement and complaint in Lee Irons' voice.

Bob Story shook his head. It was all beyond him.

"It's gettin' dark," remarked Lee Irons. "Come full dark you an' me'll fix things a little an' then you take me in to yore friend Fox Muller. You take a receipt for me so as you get the reward. If Arizona an' the Express Company think so much of me as to put out a reward it ain't but right that they should pay for yore foolishness. They're foolish themselves."

"You want me to take you in an' get the rewards!" Bob marveled at the idea. "You'd run square into trouble just because I was a damned fool! I ain't goin' to do it, Irons!"

"You will so," Irons spoke with conviction. "I seen that girl of yores an' I like her. That's part of it. The rest of it is I told you I'd help you out an' I will. You'll take me in if I have to tie you an' drag you behind me!"

"But you're runnin' square into trouble!" Bob expostulated.

"Son," said Lee Irons softly, "trouble an' me is old friends. I been layin' down with trouble ever since I was foaled an' I'm lonesome without it. It's about time to go now."

CHAPTER III

Law of the Tinhorn

WHILE the two had stood talking, arguing in front of the little frame hotel, the dusk had de-

parted and the swift night of the desert had come. Yucca's streets were dusky black, lighted now and again by the glow of kerosene lamps shining through windows. The stars hung close and the heat of the day lingered only to temper pleasantly the coming coolness of the night.

"Rodeo, New Mexico," said Lee Irons, "is just twenty miles away. That's just a step for Bud an' me. Don't forget to get a receipt from yore deputy friend when you take me in" He was moving as he spoke, opening a saddle bag and removing an object therefrom. This object he lashed fast to the side of the split ear bridle on Bud's hammer head. Having finished he untied the reins from the hitch rack, slapped Bud affectionately and removed his gun from its holster, holding it out to Bob Story.

"Take my gun," directed Lee Irons. "We'll go to jail. Now look: When we get there you tell yore friend Fox that I was supposed to be a horse buyer or somethin', an' you got to chinnin' with me. Say you recognized me by my description an' that you called me Irons an' I jumped so you throwed down on me an' taken my gun. Then you make him give you a receipt for me so as you'll get the reward. Here, take it!" He thrust his weapon into Bob's unwilling hand.

"You . . ." began Bob Story.

"Come on," ordered Lee Irons. "I'll put up my hands just before we get to the jail."

Reluctantly Bob Story followed the chunky man across the street, the dust puffing softly under their feet. There was a light in the jail, a dim yellow glow, and as the two reached the light Lee Irons lifted his hands shoulder high and marched ahead.

"Give me some orders," he whispered fiercely.

Bob obeyed that whisper. "Get up those steps an' don't try anythin' funny," he commanded, a tremor in his voice.

Lee Irons set foot on the steps.

Inside the little room that was the front of the jail, Fox Muller came swiftly to his feet. Paz Benteen, hot and bald, also scrambled up, the sweat following the creases of his face until, in little rivulets, it came together and ran down into his open collar.

"What the hell . . .?" began Fox Muller.

Bob Story followed Lee Irons into the room, his gun trained on the rusty man's back. "This is Rusty Irons," announced Bob Story, striving to keep his voice steady. "I got wise to him over at the hotel, Fox. He said he was a horse buyer. I called his name an' he jumped an' tried for his gun, but I throwed down on him an' brought him in."

"Irons?" Fox Muller's own weapon was in his red-furred hand. Muller's long, cunning face squinted, his yellowish teeth showing.

"Are you Rusty Irons?"

"There ain't no use denyin' it," grated Lee Irons. "That's my name."

"There's a reward out for him, Fox!" Paz Benteen's voice was fat as his body, and filled with cupidity. "Two thousand dollars!"

"You got him, Bob?" Muller could hardly believe what he had heard. "You brought him in?"

"You saw me." Bob Story had regained confidence. "I'll turn him over to you if you'll give me a receipt for him. I want that reward money."

"Now wait!" Fox spoke eagerly. "I'll give you a receipt for him, Bob, but Paz an' me have got to come in on this. We're entitled to some of it. We . . ."

"Why?" Bob Story's voice was cold. "How do you get a cut?"

"Because we're helpin' you!" snapped Muller. "We got some comin'."

"I don't figure it that way." Bob Story held to his point. "I can tie him an' take him to Benson on the stage tomorrow an' get it all. I . . ."

"Now . . . now wait, Bob!" In his eagerness Muller ran the words together. "You need money right now, don't you? Old John Culom will be wantin' to know about that horse money of his. You give Paz an' me the reward on Irons an' we'll turn Culom's money back to you."

BOB STORY was watching Lee Irons. Irons shook his head almost imperceptibly and Bob answered Muller. "No," he said, "I'll take a receipt for him an' turn him over to you, or I'll take him to Benson tomorrow!"

Paz Benteen was striving to catch Muller's eyes. When he did so there seemed to be an exchange between the men. Muller turned to Story again.

"I'll give you a receipt for him," he said. "We'll put him in a cell an' I'll write it out. Put his gun on the table. Cover him, Paz."

From a fold of baggy breeches Paz Benteen produced a gun, cocked it, and pointed it at Lee Irons. Bob Story laid the weapon he held, on the table beside a deck of blue-backed cards.

Muller took a key from his pocket. "Come on," he ordered. "We'll put him in a cell."

With the thin Muller in the lead, Irons next, the fat Benteen following, the men filed through the inner door of the jail office and into the lantern-lit corridor. With the key he held, Muller opened a grated door, thrust the key in his pocket, and stood back.

"Get in!" he ordered.

Lee Irons walked into the cell. The three followed him. Muller ran swift hands over Irons, removing his pocket knife, tobacco, and matches.

"Leave me my smokin'," grumbled Irons. "Damn it, I'll want a smoke."

"I'll leave you nothin'," grated Muller. "Come on!"

With the two others, he stepped out of the cell into the corridor. The cell door grated shut. For a moment or two the men stood in the corridor, looking at Irons in the cell. "There's some beddin' an' a bunk in the corner," announced Muller. "There's a water bucket over on the other side. I reckon you'll keep in there, Irons."

Paz Benteen laughed, and Muller, leaving the cell door, started down the corridor. Bob Story hung back a moment but Lee Irons had walked across the cell and was sitting on the cot. Story followed Benteen and Muller.

Left alone in his cell, Lee Irons thoughtfully removed a piece of wire from his shirt pocket, a small piece of baling wire perhaps two inches long, and in the dim light of the lantern that hung in the corridor began to twist the wire into a hook. Holding the wire, he got up from the bunk and went to the side of the cell that contained the high barred window. Apparently the citizens of Yucca, in building their jail, had considered that Arizona weather was warm enough to make glass unnecessary. From the office of the jail came a murmur of voices: Paz Benteen and Fox Muller and Bob Story talking. Lee Irons shook his head. He hadn't liked the way Muller and Benteen had reacted. They were a cunning pair, he surmised, a clever, unscrupulous partnership, and they would try to take Bob Story into camp. Still there was just a chance that the two might play fair with Bob, and Lee Irons was willing to find out. He tugged at the bunk, found that it was fastened to the floor, and thereupon set about a search to discover something that would allow him to reach the window. That window was an essential part of his plan.

THE voices in the office ceased their murmuring and Lee knew that Bob Story had gone out. At the same time he found that the boards that formed the bottom of the bunk were loose, and grunting his satisfaction Lee sat down and felt along

the edge of the thin mattress. The mattress was sewn with twine and again Lee Irons grunted his approval. Everything, he believed, was as it should be.

Benteen and Muller came back along the corridor and Irons stopped his work on the mattress. He had, since discovering the twine, loosened one end and was now busy unraveling the stitching. The two men stopped at the door and Muller peered into the cell.

"Irons!" said Muller.

Lee got up from the bunk and went to the barred door. "Yeah," he answered.

"How much is it worth to you to get out of here?" demanded Muller. "You got the gold from the stage robbery. What'll you give us to let you go?"

"I ain't got it on me," said Lee Irons.

Muller snorted his disgust. "I found that out when I went over you," he said. "Of course you got it cached. Make us a proposition an' we'll let you out an' go get the coin, if it's enough. How much?"

"What about the reward?" asked Lee, curious to know what Muller and Benteen had concocted. "The kid has got two-thousand dollars comin', ain't he?"

Muller laughed. "Not by a damn' sight," he answered. "Me an' Paz have got the reward comin'. Think we're damn' fools? We give the kid a receipt, all right, but it wasn't for you. He's goin' to be surprised when he looks it over."

"Supposin' I say that he took me?" asked Irons. "Then how'll you get yore cash?"

"That kid gambled money that wasn't his, an' lost it," returned Muller. "He's goin' to be labeled a thief an' be in the jug. Me an' Paz will swear that we took you an' that you an' Story cooked up a tale. Look here, Irons: If you want out of this you'll have to go better than two-thousand. You taken eight off the stage. We'll take that an' let you go."

"Well . . ." Lee let his voice trail off in indecision.

"Think it over," grated Muller. "You can turn over the cash to us, or you can hang. That's what you got to think about." Paz Benteen chuckled fatly and Irons made a request.

"Give me my smokin'."

"Here," Muller passed a sack of tobacco through the door bars. "Smoke all you want. You holler when yo're ready to talk business."

Leaving the sack of tobacco with their prisoner, Muller and Benteen went back along the corridor. Lee Irons rolled a smoke, lit it with one of the matches that Muller had given him, and holding the match went back to the bunk. He was pleased to note that the twine that stitched the mattress was heavy and strong. Puffing his cigarette he seated himself once more and began the tedious unraveling.

CHAPTER IV
Gun Tricks

HALF an hour went by. From the office of the jail came the ripple of shuffled cards, and an occasional word as Paz Benteen and Fox Muller played at pitch. Lee Irons fastened the unraveled twine to his hook, padded the floor with bedding from the bunk, and leaned the bottom boards against the wall below the window. Mounting the boards, bracing himself, he looked out through the bars. The spaces between them were narrow but a hand could go through and that was enough. Lee Irons whistled, a soft, carrying call, whistled again and waited. In the crystal clearness of the night he could hear the sounds of Yucca. A man laughed. Somewhere in the distance a guitar twanged plaintively. Voices passed along the hidden street and

then came the sound that Lee Irons awaited: The regular, plop . . . plop . . . plop . . . of a horse trotting. Bud was coming right along.

Something black loomed up in the shadow of the jail, a blacker shadow in the blackness. Softly, a caress in his voice, Lee Irons cursed. "Damn you, Bud. Don't you go rubbin', now. Damn you. Don't you!"

Below the bars the fore quarters of the shadow disappeared. There was a faint clink of metal and then a rasping sound against the adobe wall of the jail. "Don't you now, Bud," warned Lee Irons. This was an old, old game he played, a game that Bud, the hammer-headed roan, played and relished with Lee. Bud would stand until he saw Lee or until he was whistled up, and the height of humor, to Bud, was to rub off the split ear bridle. Lee's voice continued, soft and cursing: "Don't you, damn you!"

Something struck in the dust with a little thud. Lee Irons grinned. Carefully he lowered his hook through the window. The twine, crinkled by its long use in the mattress, would not straighten out. Lee Irons murmured a curse and pulled back his hook. He must find a sinker.

He had nothing in his pockets so he got back to the floor and rasping the hook against the adobe of the wall, produced a palm full of dirt. This, he put into the tobacco sack and tied the sack to the twine above the hook. Once more then, Lee mounted his improvised ramp and reached the window. From the office the sound of shuffled cards told him that Benteen and Muller were still at their game, still waiting for him to call and tell them that he would take their proposition.

Lee Irons scowled in the darkness as he lowered his weighted hook through the bars. Benteen and Muller! If he told them that he would give them the gold they would take it and then kill him. He knew their kind. They would double-cross a kid, gamble with a kid and win money that was not his. They would double-cross anyone, and Lee Irons knew it.

When he felt his sack strike the ground, he moved his hand, sweeping the hook along. Bud moved restlessly in the shadow of the jail.

THE dragging hook snagged. Irons drew up the twine, reached through the bars with his free hand and swore beneath his breath. He had fouled a piece of wire and brought it up. Freeing the hook from the wire, he lowered it again and resumed his dragging. There was a noise in the front of the jail and Lee paused, ready to descend swiftly and remove the evidence of his work. Bob Story's voice came clearly through the corridor.

"I'll take Irons, Fox. I've come for him. Here's your receipt."

Once more Lee lowered the hook and moved it across the ground outside the jail. Once more the hook fouled and Lee Irons pulled it up carefully.

"So you'll take Irons, will you?" Muller's voice held amusement. "Found out that the receipt was no good, did you?"

There was surprise in Bob Story's answer. "No good?"

"It ain't no good, an' you won't take Irons."

"Look here, Fox," Bob Story was pleading now, "Irons give himself up to me to help me out. I can't let him do that. I got to thinkin' it over an' I can't. I turned him in to you. Here's yore receipt. You turn him back to me."

Feeling through the bars with his freed hand Lee Irons grunted his satisfaction. This time he had caught the thing he sought, the split ear bridle that Bud had rubbed off. On the side of the headstall, where Lee had tied it, was a leather sheath and in that sheath was weight. Lee felt

the cold hard rubber of the grips of his spare gun, a thirty-eight gambler's gun. Hastily and yet carefully Lee unsnapped the thong holding the gun in place, and brought the weapon into the cell. The bridle, freed, dropped back outside and the twine ran out through the window.

The voices still came from the jail office, angry voices. Bob Story was not having his way out there. Lee grinned as he came down from his ramp. Pretty good kid, after all, Bob Story. Worth fooling with. He'd got to thinking it over and had come back to take Lee Irons out of jail and turn him loose. The boards and the bedding went back on the bunk and Lee Irons broke the little, double action weapon. Bright brass cartridge heads winked in the light that came from the corridor.

"You damn' fool!" said Fox Muller in the jail office. "Think we're goin' to give up two-thousand dollars? Yo're nothin' but a thief. In the mornin' you'll be in jail yorese'f for stealin' John Culom's money. Nobody'll believe you."

"I want Irons!" Lee had not believed that Bob Story's voice could be so hard.

"Easy!" Muller snapped the word. "Paz has had you covered since you come in. If he tries, let him have it, Paz!"

Now that it was getting tough out there, Lee Irons raised his voice.

"Muller! Muller! Come back here. I'll take that bet you made me."

There was a grunt in the jail office and then Muller said: "Watch Story, Paz." A chair scuffed against the floor. Boots sounded as Muller came back along the corridor. His thin, sunburned face was grinning and his yellow teeth showed between his thin lips. "Don't want to hang, huh?" he said as he stopped in front of the cell.

"No," said Lee Irons, then he said with no feeling: "Stand still, you Tinhorn! This is a gun I've got!"

MULLER'S mouth made a red O with the long teeth serving for exclamation points. He moved his hand toward his hip and stopped the motion as the gambler's gun shifted in Irons' hand.

"In yore pants' pocket!" breathed Irons menacingly. "The key. Pronto, unless you want me to take it off you!"

Again Muller's hand moved. "What's the matter, Fox?" Benteen called anxiously from the office.

"Get that key!" came Iron's rasping whisper. "Turn around an' back up to the bars. I'll get it myself!"

Muller turned slowly and took a step back. Lee's big hand dived roughly into his trouser's pocket, and then a cold hard object was thrust against the deputy's sweating back.

"Stan' still!" rasped Lee Irons.

"Fox . . . Fox . . ." Benteen called again. Lee Irons was fitting the key into the lock, using his sense of touch, not daring to take his eyes from Fox. In the jail office there was movement, a scuffling sound, then a thud followed by another, softer thud. The key clicked in the cell lock and there was a groan in the office. Steps sounded and Bob Story was in the corridor, his gun in his hand and his face strained and fierce.

"Irons . . ." called Bob Story. "What . . .?"

"Stay there, kid," ordered Lee Irons, fumbling with the key and the lock. "You might throw yore gun on this jasper if you want. I'm havin' hell with this key . . . Nope! There she is!"

The lock bolt clicked and the cell door rasped a complaint. Then Lee Irons walked out into the corridor. Muller stood rigid, his face a scowling mask, his hands at his shoulders where, unbidden, he had lifted them.

"What . . .?" began Bob Story.

"I'm ridin' on tonight," drawled Lee Irons. "I cain't stop with you no longer."

"Where did you get that gun?" demanded Bob Story. "Where . . .?"

"From my friend, Bud," Irons answered. "Walk careful, Muller, we're goin' out front. What did you do to Benteen, kid?"

"I hit him over the head with my gun," answered Bob Story, his voice dazed. "He started up to see what was the matter with Fox an' I pulled an' hit him."

"I reckon," drawled Irons, "that you wasn't tryin' yore best in front of that mirror this afternoon. Mebbe if I could teach you a little you'd learn to draw yet. Careful, Muller. Be damn' careful!"

Muller stepped gingerly over the lintel of the office door.

Beside the table Paz Benteen was slumped on the floor. He stirred as the three came from the corridor, shoving himself up. There was blood trickling over his ear and a dazed expression in his eyes.

"You might take yore fat friend's gun, kid," suggested Lee Irons.

Bob Story stepped past Muller and bent over Paz. Straightening, he laid Benteen's weapon on the table.

"I ain't takin' yores, Muller," said Lee Irons gently. "I'm hopin' you'll try to use it."

Fox Muller stiffened.

"Nice fellows, you an' Benteen," Irons continued, moving around Muller. "Real nice boys. First you cheat the kid an' take money that you knowed he had no business to gamble. Then you cheat him again by givin' him a bad receipt for me, an' then you try to take me in by offerin' to turn me loose if I'll give you what I got from the Bisbee stage. Think I don't know that I'd never of lived if I'd give you that? You must think I'm a damn' fool!"

"But . . . but how did you get that gun, Irons?" demanded Bob Story.

"Never mind!" snapped Lee Irons. "You go through Benteen, kid. See what he's got on him."

CHAPTER V
Ace in the Hole

LIKE a man in a daze Bob Story obeyed. From Paz Benteen's pockets he brought money, a knife, tobacco, and a fat roll of bills. These he placed on the table.

"Try Muller, too," directed Irons, "an' don't get between him an' me. I like to look at him."

Again Story obeyed. Another collection of miscellany and another roll of bills was added to those on the table.

"Count the bills, kid," directed Lee. "Count out eight-hundred dollars an' put it in yore pocket. That's yores."

"But . . ." began Bob Story.

"Yeah, I know they won it," drawled Irons. "But look, kid. Look at them cards. They're marked, every one of 'em. That blue deck has got blue smudges on it, an' the red deck is marked in red. Them little cans on the table got markin' ink in 'em. Hell, son! You got no right to gamble 'til you can tell marked cards. See the smudges?"

Bob Story was scowling. He picked up the deck of blue, bicycle-backed cards and looked at them. Now that it had been pointed out he could see the faint traces of blue ink that marked the cards. "Why, you . . .!" began Bob Story, glaring at Muller.

"Count out yore money an' don't gamble no more 'til you get some moss on yore horns," directed Lee Irons. "Shucks, Son! Yo're a fool."

Bob Story put down the deck of cards and picked up one roll of dirty bills.

"Just eight-hundred, mind," drawled Lee Irons. "What's yores is yores, an' the rest would stink, comin' from skunks as it does."

Deliberately Bob Story counted bills, dropping them into a criss-crossed pile. Muller stood stock still. Beside the table Paz Benteen caressed

his bald head with a trembling hand. Lee Irons, implacable, watched the scene, his greenish eyes flitting from one man to another.

"Eight-hundred," announced Bob Story. "I'll give this to John an' go with you, Irons. I can't stay here."

"Why not?" drawled Lee Irons. "There won't be a thing to stop you stayin', an' yore girl's here. These gents are goin' to have to do a heap of explainin' when they're found in a cell tomorrow mornin', an' when you show the boys the marked cards an' all. There ain't no real reason why you can't stay here. You might have to do some watchin', that's all."

"Damn you!" Fox Muller could no longer hold his rage. "I'll kill you for this, Irons! You an' Story. You can't . . ."

"Nope!" snapped Irons. "You won't kill nobody. Take his gun off him now, kid. I got an idea."

Again Bob Story moved forward. Carefully keeping from between Muller and Irons he reached out and lifted Muller's weapon from its holster. Then he stood back.

Irons was grinning broadly. "Now," he ordered, "you head back for that cell of mine. Go with Benteen, an' walk careful."

Reluctantly Muller turned. Benteen, still holding his head with one hand, had already moved to the jail door. Bob Story had thoroughly knocked the fight from Paz Benteen. Back along the corridor they walked, Muller cursing, Paz Benteen silent, and Lee Irons moving catlike behind them. The two filed into the cell, the door clanging shut. Lee Irons turned the key in the lock, pulled it out, and stood holding it.

"Now," said Lee Irons, "I'll tell you two: Yo're a pair of tin-horns an' you ain't to be trusted. That's why you ain't goin' to stay in Yucca. Tomorrow yo're goin' to pull out an' be damn glad to do it. First place, everybody'll know about yore crooked cards. Next place, yo're goin' to be found locked in yore own jail, an' third place, if you don't pull out an' I hear of it I'll come back an' kill you both. If I hear of yore foolin' with Story I'm comin' anyhow an' I'll sure hear. Sabe?"

Neither Muller, scowling by the door, nor Benteen cowering on the bunk, made answer to the question. Lee Irons waited a moment, then grunting contemptuously, turned on his heel. "Come on, Son," he ordered Bob Story.

In the jail office Irons picked up the pile of bills from the table and held them out to Bob. "Take these an' skeedaddle," he commanded. "Give 'em to the man they belong to. An' you stay away from gamblin'. You don't know enough to gamble. Yo're a pretty good kid though, at that." Irons' face creased suddenly into a smile. "Comin' back the way you did, makes me think mebbe you'll do for that girl. Take 'em now, an' git!"

Bob Story took the extended bills. "You—" he began. "I— Hell! I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say it," directed Lee Irons. "Pull yore freight."

"I can't thank you," Bob Story blurted.

Lee Irons took a swift step. His broad hands caught Story's shoulders and he whirled the boy around. "Git out!" rasped Lee Irons, propelling Bob toward the door. "Git out an' stay out. Yo're tyin' me up an' I got to make Rodeo before mornin'." With a shove he sent Bob down the steps of the jail and out into the street. Bob staggered, regained his footing, and turned. Lee Irons was already gone from the door. The light shown through blankly. For a moment Bob Story stood there, indecisive; then, slowly, he went down the street.

BACK in the jail office Lee Irons searched about until he found the Colt he had given Bob Story. This he

placed in his empty holster. Still searching he recovered his knife, his loose change, and his papers and matches. He stood scowling for a moment and then spying an unopened sack of Durham, picked it up and put it in his pocket.

"What's mine is mine," murmured Lee Irons to himself. "I done ruined my smokin' with that dirt."

Again he stared at the little office. Back in the cell he could hear Muller and Benteen talking, reviling each other, already quarreling as to who was to blame for their predicament. Grinning, Irons sat down at the table. With a piece of pencil and a torn scrap of dirty paper he fell to work, scrawling a note.

> To whom it matters. These tinhorns taken me in an I got out. there cards was marked but I had a hole card.
>
> Rusty Irons.

Having completed the epistle he placed it on the table, the marked decks of bicycle cards flanking it, and the cell key on top. Then, satisfied, Lee Irons left the office.

In the shadow of the jail Bud waited patiently. Irons retrieved the bridle from below the cell window, grinning as he heard the conversation coming from inside. Bud came at his master's whistle and submitted unwillingly to the bit.

"Damn you, Bud," Irons murmured affectionately. "You dang' jughead." Bud's yellow teeth snapped, and instinctively Irons dodged. Then catching a stirrup he swung up. For a moment he sat there, silent and straight in the saddle. Then Bud moved, his feet striking softly in the dirt, his shadow dark among the greater shadows.

At the edge of the little town Lee Irons stopped and looked back. There were lights in the town, and people. In the jail there were two men who cursed each other and who presently would begin to yell to attract attention. Also in the little town there were a happy boy and a girl and an old man who had the money that belonged to him. The kid would have learned a lesson, Lee Irons hoped. A pretty good kid, Bob Story. Irons was warm as he thought of the boy.

Bud swung an impatient head, and moving a little in the saddle, Irons gave consent to Bud's wish.

"Go 'long, Bud," said Lee Irons.

His stop-off in Yucca was over.

The End

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BOOTHILL PILGRIM

By WILLIAM JOSEPH LANCASTER

The story of a deputy—a girl—and a strange trick of Fate on gun-smoke trails

The two men closed in as a shadow appeared in the doorway

DAVE TROBITT would have ridden on into those strange, purple hills if he had not glanced down the gulch and discovered the little town nestled there. Dave cared little where he went—so long as he got as far away from Pioneer Center—and the girl—as possible.

But he was hungry so he reined down the gulch and jogged into town. The Charcoal Hotel—the Charcoal Livery—the Charcoal Bank—gave him the name of the town. It was behind the Charcoal Stage Station that he noticed four men dismounting from dust-streaked horses.

A heavy-set bow-legged man, with a prominent beak-shaped twisted nose which gave him a gaunt fiendish look, made Dave glance at him a second time. Dave's own nose was crooked, due to a fall from a horse in a Salinas rodeo.

He was straight as an arrow and had a mop of yellow hair. His face usually wore a good natured expression, but his present state of mind had made his mouth a grim hard line.

Sight of the Gunstock Cafe, wrenched his thoughts away from the four horsemen. He hitched his horse and went in. A girl, as dark as he was light, was wiping glasses behind the counter. She was quite alone. Girls were not in favor with Dave just then and he would have backed out, but the place was invitingly clean so he slid onto a stool. The girl turned, gave him a hasty glance.

"Give me a big steak with plenty of coffee, Sister, and get your pies warmed up. I'm starved."

She put a glass of water before him, then slapped a steak on the gridiron. Dave put his broad Stetson on the counter and adjusted his gun into a comfortable position. The girl brought knife, fork and spoon, then, looking up suddenly, gave a sharp cry and dropped the silverware to the floor.

"Mash your toe?" asked Dave flatly.

"No—it was nothing—I just—" She stooped below the counter as though to pick them up. When she raised she held a sawed-off shotgun in her hands.

"Keep your arms where they are and don't try any tricks!" she ordered and there was excitement in her brown eyes. Dave noticed a band of small freckles on her nose.

"You got your nerve—riding in broad daylight branded with that crooked nose! When there's $1000 posted for your capture! Well—I'm needing that money more than most anybody, so don't move!" She circled the counter, rammed the barrels into his back and lifted his Colt. Then slid back to her accustomed post.

"Who am I supposed to be?" Dave inquired irritably.

"Wasp Pringle of course. The worst outlaw in this vicinity. And I know what you're after too. Well you won't get it!" She dropped Dave's six-shooter out of sight, muzzle down, in a deep pitcher on a shelf over the dish rack. She put the shotgun back under the counter, where it could be snatched up in a flash. Dave knew how easy it was to shoot with a spray gun like that. He tried to appear at ease.

"But except for my nose I ain't so ugly looking, am I?" he said, viewing himself in the long mirror behind the pitcher where his gun lay hidden.

"If you don't mention those bow legs you're packing. Those don't add to your charms do they?" She was turning the steak and its smell was good.

Dave took off his gun-belt. Put it under his hat. "You might as well have the whole outfit," he said and built a cigarette. "It'll take that much more off my weight in case you get me stretched. Do I eat or don't I?"

"I might as well feed you to keep you quiet. I'll have to wait until someone comes in or goes past so I can call help. This is a quiet time of day."

She poured his coffee but let him reach for it, not giving him a chance to grab her wrists. "You're spunky at any rate," Dave said, "I got no use for women that ain't got enough grit to tide 'em over the rough spots. I know one that up and married a pasty-faced rich old duffer, twice her own age, just to please her ambitious mother."

"And I suppose she was really in love with you?"

"You guessed it right, Sister. From now on I got no use for chicken-hearted dames. For any dames. Even nervy ones like you can't tell the difference between square shooters and outlaw marauders. Or don't you care as long as you can grab off the reward? That steak's done."

SHE put the steak on the plate, heaped on the trimmings and slid it along the counter. After that, while Dave ate, she watched the door and the street beyond. But she kept her eye on him also. Now and then she glanced at the shotgun.

Presently there sounded the beat of high heels on the board walk and

a man came into the place. He crossed to the counter, laying an appraising glance on Dave, and straddled a stool. "Come on, Freckles—fry up a settin' of eggs and plenty of ham. I'm hungry."

Dave wondered why she did not tell the new-comer she had Wasp Pringle and to go for help. Instead she broke an egg into the fry pan and her face grew whiter. It brought out the freckles on her nose. Then, unexpectedly, the back door opened and two other men slipped in.

The beak-nosed man Dave had seen back of the stage shed was in the lead. The fellow behind was a wirey, agile looking sinner with strands of black hair hanging into his eyes. He went at once to the front door where he could watch the street. Th man on the stool stood up with a gun in his hand. He held it trained on Dave.

"Keep on eatin' that grub, stranger, like nothin' was in the wind. I got him covered, Wasp."

This last cleared up the situation. Dave shot a look at the girl and saw that she, too, understood. The one called Wasp rested his gun barrel on the counter and spoke. "I was tipped off that Bill Drake left the Powder Flat payroll here with you, Miss. Hand it over!"

One of the men moved over to search Dave. "Go on, Wasp. This ranney ain't packin' no smoke tube. Want me to drill him and be done with it?"

"And notify the town we're here? Sometimes I think your brains is just another set of guts, Tanner." Wasp holstered his gun, stepped around the end of the counter. The girl looked frightened, but she did not cower. Dave admired her grit. He wondered if she would try for the shotgun, but Wasp saw it and broke it open. "More of Drake's blunderin'. Likely he told you there was a brace of buckshot loads in this gun," he grinned.

"Bill Drake didn't leave it. I knew it wasn't loaded. What would I want with a loaded shotgun? There isn't anything here worth stealing."

"My tip's too well grounded to believe that. The money's here someplace. In a nosebag. Just the way Drake brought it in on the stage."

"She might'a took it out of the nosebag and hid it in the flour or somethin'," Tanner suggested.

"Hid nothin'," Wasp barked. "Here it is right under the shotgun." He set a canvas nosebag on the counter. It was heavy with gold.

Dave drained his coffee cup. Put it on the counter noisily. "Fill this up again, Sister," he ordered. "You make good coffee. But be sure to pour it out of that same pitcher. The one there on the shelf."

Her dark, startled eyes met Dave's in a fleeting glance, but there was understanding in it. She put the pitcher on the counter. "Fill you own cup," she said. "And don't blame me if it don't turn out like you hope."

Dave slid partly off the stool so that his foot was firmly planted on the floor. His left hand closed around the handle. He tipped the pitcher toward him, steadying the lip with his right hand. Then, suddenly, tossing aside the empty pitcher, he snapped to his feet, his own gun filling his steady hand.

It was a tricky layout to cover—those three men spread out as they were, but Dave took the chance. His command was deep-toned, crisp, astonishing. "Get 'em up—every damned one of you!" He backed toward the open rear door to better cover the three men but more to gain a position where he could cover Wasp if that bandit attempted to duck behind the counter.

IT was the agile, black-haired man at the front door who made the first move. He grabbed for his gun. He was lightning fast and his draw as smooth as a beaver pelt. Dave's shot

had to be fast and it was. It raised a din in the room. The man with the hair in his eyes fired too but the shot ripped into the floor. Then he pitched forward as if trying to cover the bullet hole he had made.

Dave snapped his eyes back to the other two renegades. Whisked his hat through the air to fan away the layer of acrid powder smoke. He opened his mouth to give another order, when a sound behind him snapped his eyes that way. Not in time, however, to dodge the stroke of a big six-shooter in the hand of a man who unexpectedly put in an appearance.

It was a glancing blow but it spun Dave to his knees. Wasp was there in a flash, kicking the gun out of Dave's hand. The one called Tanner jumped in, held Dave down on the floor.

"That was good work, Weepah," Wasp praised. "Another shot would'a raised hell. It's a wonder the shootin' that's took place ain't brought men on the run. We got to work fast."

"Yeah," agreed Weepah. "I heard them shots. That's why I came on the run. And just in the nick of time. I left the horses ground-hitched. Will I slit the snake's throat?"

Wasp was running brown fingers into Dave's pockets. Presently he held out a deputy's badge. "I had a hunch this hellion was a law-wrangler. I'll bet he's from Pioneer Center. Name of Trobitt. We ain't knifin' him yet. We'll drag him along with us. Make him tell who it was laid that trap for Baldy Welsh and beat us out of that train hold-up."

"If he's Trobitt he won't spill nothin'," Weepah argued.

"I know a trick with a lit candle that'll make him talk. Let's get goin'. Take the girl along. She's seen too much."

Tanner turned back from the door. "There's two men just came out of the livery barn. They's rakin' the street with their eyes like they's wonderin' where the shootin' is."

"Yeah, I see 'em. Listen, Tanner—You go fork this lawman's horse out front and light out for the Brakes. If those rannies is sighted trouble, they'll high-tail it after you. Me and Weepah will slip out the back way, pick up the horses and make our get away."

"Like always I get the dirty end," Tanner grumbled but he obeyed. After he went, they jerked Dave to his feet, rammed a gun in his back and marched him out. Wasp grabbed the girl's arm and dragged her along too.

Out behind the stage shed, they got the horses. Lashed the prisoner's feet under their mounts and at once headed for the timber. The sun was low when they topped out over the ridge. They rode single file along the narrow trail. Weepah in the lead and Wasp bringing up the rear. The girl and Dave rode in between. It grew dark as they dropped down the wooded slope. Dave tried to lay down landmarks at intervals, but complete darkness crowded down to make this difficult.

He knew they were headed for some secret owlhoot hideout. He wondered what such a place held in store for a pretty girl. If she was thinking the same thing, she had nerve enough to hide it. After a time the moon poked its cold form over the ridge back of them. Trees made black fretwork against the sky.

PRESENTLY three trails cut their line of march. Weepah held to the right down a steep ravine. The walls of a narrow defile hemmed them in, a chilling draught made them shiver. Finally they climbed a steep shoulder with granite shale under foot and entered a sheltered clearing. Wasp took down the bars of a pole corral. Weepah went on and lit a lamp in a cabin under a cliff. Light streamed across and showed Dave how well secluded was this den of thieves.

Weepah returned and helped Wasp

untie the prisoners and they were taken into the ill-smelling cabin. Wasp opened a door into a bunk room beyond. Dave saw four bunks against the walls. A window in the end, covered with a moth-eaten cowhide. Wasp forced the girl into a bunk, tied her hands behind her back and roped her ankles. Weepah trussed up Dave in a like manner but shoved him into a corner on the floor.

"Let's cook up some grub," Wasp said harshly. "We can put the screws on this law-hound after we've et." He went, then to stand over the girl. "I'm glad Bill Drake picked you to leave the pay roll with," he said with glee in his voice. "You'll make me a pretty plaything."

They went out and closed the door. A thin shaft of light struck through a crack and fell along the edge of the bunk. It touched the pale, drawn face of the girl. Dave waited until the clatter of stove lids and fry pans would mute his voice, then he whispered, "I'm right sorry, girl. What's your name?"

"Greeley—Judy Greeley."

"Mine's Dave Trobitt. If I get out of this I'll make that hook-nosed hyena wish he'd never touched you."

"Thanks—but you won't get out, Dave. They'll torture you—kill you in the end." For the first time there was a tremble in her voice.

Bacon began to sputter and Dave heard them dump the money out on the table. They grew talkative.

"Tanner ought to be along soon unless he's got a slug in his spine," volunteered Weepah.

"I was about to say," Wasp commented, "I don't see no need to split this haul three ways. We'll cache most of it and tell Tanner what he sees is all we got."

"Honor among thieves," Dave thought as he struggled into a sitting position against the wall. In doing so he knocked down some object that had been leaning against the wall. It rapped out an alarm on the floor and there was a scuffing of boots in the next room and the door opened. Dave had barely time to drop to the floor again when Weepah came in.

"Quit your thrashin' around, hombre, or we'll hang you up by your thumbs!" he snarled but eyes left Dave at once and rested, hungrily, on Judy. He came a few steps closer, then shot a cautious glance over his shoulder. Wasp appeared in the doorway and Weepah's eyes whipped back to Dave.

There would be blood spilled over the girl, Dave knew. He realized also that she would fare worse with one of them alone than with both of them there. He lay there, with his cheek resting on something cold and hard until they closed the door again. Then he wiggled along until his bound hands came in contact with the thing his face had touched. It was a double-bitted ax.

His fingers were so numb it took some time to up-end the ax head and find a crack where he could wedge in one of the blades. This done, he sawed his wrist ropes across the other edge. Warm blood ran down into his palms but he did not stop.

His breathing quickened, became audible and he was unaware of the sudden silence in the next room. He did not realize the door was opening until the path of light touched him. It was Wasp this time and he sprang forward like a mad steer. Swinging his boot in a wide arc he planted it against Dave's temple. Dave thought he saw a brilliant flash of orange lamplight, studded with star-shaped spots. Then everything became black, as he sank into oblivion.

Wasp picked up the ax. Judy's small cry spun him around. He grinned at her. "So that's the way you feel about this jackal, eh? I wasn't aimin' to cleave this ax through his skull, if that's what you're belly-achin' about. That is not yet. I'm

countin' on makin' him talk before I wipe him out."

He wrenched his heavy eyes away from her and raked Weepah with a withering glance. "That's your ax," he said, "and you ought'a knowed it was there in the corner. One minute more and the hound would'a been loose. What else is there he can file away with when he comes to?"

"Nothin' I knows of—unless you got somethin' cached between your blankets, Wasp. I'll have a look."

"Stay away from that bunk if you knows what's good for you! And throw a fresh hitch on the hound's wrists." When this was done they went back to their meal and closed the door.

SLOWLY, painfully Dave lifted himself out of the fog of unconsciousness. Deep weariness held him motionless until he suddenly recalled where he was. He twisted his aching head to find Judy looking at him.

"Are—are you all right, Dave?" she whispered. He nodded, not trusting his voice at first. He liked her spirit. "Wasp's a mighty tough-skinned outlaw," he said. "I'm worrying about you—"

Her voice was so faint that he scarcely heard her when she said, "I can take care of myself. I have a knife in a sheath buckled above my knee where I don't think he'll discover it."

For a moment Dave lay quiet trying to still the pounding of his heart.

"Where Wasp wouldn't find it," he kept repeating and trying to make it sound convincing. But he knew Wasp *would* discover it. . . . But that knife was there now and the men in the next room thought they had searched the place.

They were out there counting money now and their voices were raised in argument. Dave rolled over and over, testing each floor board before trusting his weight to it. When he got to the bunk, he worked himself up, on his knees. Taking the hem of her skirt in his teeth he began tugging it up. Not until his chin brushed her knee did he hesitate and throw her an apologizing glance. Judy nodded for him to go on.

He exposed the sheath, pulled the knife with his teeth, then forced the sharp point into the soft pine rail of the bunk and held it there with the handle pressed against his back while he brought his wrists up under the keen edge.

His hands were free in a few seconds and then he severed the ropes on his legs and cut Judy loose. He stuck the knife back in the sheath, lifted her to her feet. Held her close to him an instant, then they tiptoed to the window. When he had lifted her out, he said, "Take Wasp's horse, the roan, and lead it until you're out of earshot, then ride like hell. When you get to the bottom of the trail keep your eyes on the ridge. You'll sight twin pines outlined against the sky and it's there that the trails fork and you hold sharp left."

"You mean you aren't coming?"

"No. I'm sticking here to make a little noise. Otherwise they might grow suspicious. You can send help. They won't do much to me before then." He let the cowhide drop and listened for the sound of her going. Catching no noise he took hope. Yet he stood, breathless waiting for the nicker of a horse, or the sharp click of steel on granite.

THEN, abruptly a chair was shoved back and Wasp's voice raked the night. "I've a mind to gut shoot you, Weepah! On two counts. Your tally on that payroll is cockeyed for one thing and your eyes stray too damned easy when you're in the bunkroom. Now—" He stopped as if listening to some sound outside.

"Wait a minute," he went on at last. "I got a hunch things is too

quiet in that room. I'll take a look. You go lug in a armful of firewood."

Dave sped across the room, flattened himself against the inner wall. Every muscle as taut as harness traces on an upgrade pull. He remembered how the lamplight, streaming out through the door, had reached clear down to the corral when Weepah first lighted it. If Judy was stealing down the trail, Weepah would instantly discover her.

But his thoughts were whipped away from that now for the inner door was kicked open and Wasp stepped in. Seeing the empty bunk an oath rattled in his throat and his hand dropped to his gun. Dave took one step. All his strength centered in a punch aimed at Wasp's jaw. It reeled the big man against the empty bunk.

Dave grabbed for the half drawn six-shooter. But Wasp's falling body ruined his calculations. Dave shot across another vicious punch. It went over Wasp's shoulder. Then a shot rocked the small room and a bullet burned a furrow along Dave's side.

He closed in, kicking at the smoking gun. They clinched, went thudding to the floor. Dave was underneath, Wasp's foul breath hot on his cheek. His hands and legs were still numb from being bound up so long. Wasp was a powerful man and a crazed one. His big hand worked up across Dave's throat. His broad thumb flattened against Dave's windpipe.

Dave felt his eyes begin to bulge. In desperation he rammed his knee up into Wasp's groin. The grip slacked off and Wasp let out a groan. Dave jabbed in another. He was heaving with all his might to throw Wasp over, when Weepah appeared in the doorway. He had a six-shooter and he was trying to get in a shot.

Wasp's broad shoulders shielded Dave. Weepah capered about looking for an opening. Dave hugged Wasp close, twisting about to avoid exposing his body. In the struggle his hip touched Wasp's dropped gun. One hand left Wasp's shoulder, felt and got the gun.

His fingers closed on it just as Weepah's six-shooter spat out a lancelike flame. A sharp pain bit through Dave's side, but Wasp's body jerked oddly too, as he let out a roar of fear. "You damned fool, Weepah! That creased me!" he bellowed. "What you aimin' to do?"

Weepah thumbed back the hammer, angled for another shot. Dave whipped Wasp's dropped gun up across Wasp's back. Weepah was so close now that the fire from Dave's gun reached clear across and touched the spot on Weepah's shirt where the .45 had bored its ragged hole.

He fell forward, his head under the bunk. The gun left his lifeless hand. It was then that Dave crashed the heavy gun barrel against Wasp's temple. His limp body relaxed, rolled over on the floor. Dave got to his feet. Warm blood was crawling under his belt. Spreading out, fan-shaped down his thigh.

Through the heavy layer of gun smoke, Dave saw that Wasp was beginning to move, was regaining consciousness. Hurriedly knotting together the ropes that had bound Judy, Dave tied Wasp's legs and hands. After that he buckled on Weepah's belt and guns. Tanner might be along any minute. He hoped Judy would not encounter the bandit on the trail.

Unexpectedly a tremulous voice stirred the silence of the room. "Are —are you all right, Dave?"

He looked up to find Judy's white face at the window.

"Why did you come back?" he asked.

"I never went away. You see I remembered you had given me the knife. That you had nothing to fight with. Are you all right?"

"Sure I'm all right. I got your reward all trussed up ready for delivery. Come around to the door."

SHE stood very close to him when she came and her smile brushed away the blue devils that tormented his heart. Her hand went out to touch his arm. A vague excitement piled up within him.

"The reward belongs to you," Judy said. "It was you who caught Wasp Pringle."

"A deputy can't rightfully collect a reward. I'm still a deputy although I aimed to chuck it all when I left Pioneer Center. Top of that you said you needed the money right bad."

"I wanted to buy a little place of my own and get away from that outlaw town. That's all."

Dave Trobitt smiled down at her and life for him was sweet again. "Listen, Judy," he said softly, "I've got a place in a lush, green valley ten miles out of Pioneer Center. I built a pole cabin there —for a girl, but——"

"But she married a pasty-faced old codger twice her age, just to please an ambitious mother?" Judy asked.

Dave wondered why she remembered his exact words so casually spoken back there in the Gunstock Cafe. He said, "Yes—that was my plan then. But I pictured a girl with enough grit to team up with a poor man making his start. A girl more like you, I guess, Judy. How about——"

There was a sound, a step. Dave whirled around. Tanner's dusty form filled the doorway. His gun was drawn. "Get them paws up, hombre! Where's Wasp and Weepah?" But a glance, thrown into the next room, answered the question. Tanner's muddy eyes rested on Dave again.

"Did you drill them sidewinders or was they wranglin' over the money and killed each other?" It was a question that clearly showed the attitude among thieves. Then Wasp's unsteady voice issued from the smoky room.

"I ain't dead, Tanner, Plug that lawman and come cut me loose. Weepah's dead. Me and you'll split two ways."

Judy's voice trailed in after Wasp's. "He means he'll split what's left. We heard them saying they had hidden some of the loot against your coming."

Tanner's hungry eyes measured Judy's trim figure and a grin broke across his round, bearded face. "I reckon you're speakin' the truth, pretty one. Maybe it'll be me and you that does the splittin' two ways—eh? But first take that lawman's gun."

Judy obeyed. And it was when he watched her lay it on he cluttered table that his eyes fell on the money heaped there among the tin dishes. But Tanner did not let Dave get out of the tail of his eye. He held the six-shooter pointed at Dave's heart. Judy did not take her eyes off of Dave either. Their eyes met and she saw desperation leap into his, saw him shoot one fleeting glance at the lamp.

Cautiously, she leaned over the table, running her fingers through the piled gold pieces and making them dance and glisten in the lamp-light. She looked up at Tanner and said, "Pretty isn't it? But there's more of it cached some place. Why don't you make Wasp tell where they hid it?" Her fingers left the money, and rested lightly on Wasp's dirty Stetson that lay clase by.

Suddenly with incredible swiftness, she fanned the wide hat across the lamp. A flame licked up through the chimney top and then the room was velvet black. Dave shoved her aside just as the fire of Tanner's gun streaked a line past the spot where Dave had been standing.

Crowding Judy down behind the stove. Davy groped for and found the gun Judy had put on the table. With his other hand he tossed a tin cup across the room. Instantly Tanner threw a shot in the direction of the noise. It whined away through the open door, spent itself in the timber beyond. This second flash showed that Tanner had shifted his position also.

Dave cracked down on the spot. A gun crashed to the floor, a grunt split the night, followed by the fall of a heavy body. Dave moved again, then risked striking a match. It showed Tanner trying to lift to his knees. Dave went to stand over him,

the barrel of his gun forcing the big outlaw back on the floor.

"Stay there, Tanner if you want to live!" he commanded. Then he said to Judy, "Here's a match, girl. Light the lamp." After that he sent her for a rope. "You can get one from a saddle out at the corral. Hurry."

When she went, Dave kicked Tanner's gun out of reach.

"Did you get the rattler, Tanner?" called Wasp who had not got the truth of the shooting.

"Get hell!" Tanner choked. "I got a slug through my own neck. That wench fanned out the light. But you'll hang and rattle from a tree some place, Wasp and I'm glad of it. You've double-crossed me and Weepah long enough." He coughed and some blood showed on his lips. But Dave knew he was not beyond saving.

"You'll live, Tanner," he assured the man. "Although you don't deserve it. Judy'll fix you up when she comes back."

"I'd be mightily obliged for that," Tanner said hopefully. "She's a right gritty wench and I guess she belongs to you . . ."

"Yes—" Judy said from the door as she tossed Dave the rope. "We've got a little place in a lush, green valley."

"Where kids can grow up," Dave supplemented. "And breath air that ain't tainted by trigger-vipers like you and Wasp Pringle."

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